

Trevor has come to class feeling very down. Last week he took a service in his own church and thought it had gone really well – that is, until a very forthright lady took him aside afterwards and told him she couldn't hear a word of what he had said! He came away totally deflated and confesses to feeling somewhat irritated and unappreciated.

He asks.....

Why do people who are hard of hearing always sit at the back?

Trevor, that is a question which probably everybody who has ever preached has asked themselves at some time or other! You put in hours of preparation; you preach your heart out; you think you have really got through to people and then someone pricks your bubble saying that they “couldn’t hear you very well”. You politely apologise but inside you are really dying to ask them why on earth they insist on sitting as far back in the church as is humanly possible.

Years ago in the days before microphones there doesn’t seem to have been the same bother. Preachers then were mostly male and mostly given to a louder and more forceful delivery than is common today. I remember standing in Gwennap Pit, a natural amphitheatre in rural Cornwall where John Wesley is said on one occasion to have addressed and been heard by as many as 32,000! I would imagine that is an exaggeration but it is still amazing to us today to think of such open air preaching without even the slightest artificial amplification

Times have changed, of course, and so has preaching. Nowadays most preachers tend to use a softer more conversational style and this has, no doubt, helped to create the problem. In fairness to the lady who took you aside last week it must be incredibly frustrating to be out at church, to settle down to listen to a sermon and then to discover that you miss most of what is being said. Maybe she was venting some of that frustration on you but maybe also she was trying to do you a favour. It would be tragic if everyone was so polite that no-one ever told you that they couldn’t hear you properly.

She, of course, will see it as your fault. You, on the other hand will put it down to her defective hearing. Probably both of you are right. It certainly would help if she sat nearer the front or at the very least beside a wall speaker. If only!! On your part you have to recognise that you are clearly not coming across to people with a hearing impairment. Something has to give – and I’m afraid it has to be you!

This is where a good preaching mentor should be able to help you. Some people think that as long as they are in front of a microphone they will always be heard. That is just not true. It is usually not so much a matter of speaking up as speaking out. The microphone will boost your sound levels but it can’t do much for you if you don’t project your voice outwards (as opposed to speaking “into yourself”). Most complaints about preachers who can’t be heard, centre around the fact that they

mumble and fail to speak distinctly. It takes practice – and an honest mentor who can give you proper feedback.

One of the standard tricks of the trade in terms of public speaking is to fix on the back wall or a person in the back seat and consciously direct your voice to reach that point. If you keep this in mind you won't go far wrong. The trouble arises when you get so engrossed in what you are saying that you forget the technique and unconsciously drop your voice. Next time you are in church make a special point of listening to how your minister speaks. He or she will have had to learn the knack of good verbal communication. It's hard to describe but it seems to me to be a mixture of clarity, pitch and pacing. Speak too quickly and your words will run into one another and become indistinct. Speak too slowly and you will bore the socks off anyone in the congregation under the age of sixty. I wouldn't worry too much at your stage. It will come with experience. To be aware of the problem is more than half the battle.

While we're on the subject of speaking and audibility it's important to reflect on how verbal communication takes place. Of course words are important but every bit as important is our tone of voice. People hear the sense of our words but they also register at a deeper level the way we say them. We can say all the right words but their effect can be quite lost if we sound cold, uncaring and insincere. Indeed we can ruin and even contradict our message if we fail to deliver it in a way that touches people's hearts. That is usually the difference between an academic lecture and a good sermon. You will never be a good preacher if you only deliver lectures and impart biblical information. People want to know that you care about them. (Read the account of Jesus' conversation with the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15 and reflect on how his tone of voice must have softened his words.)

We're not just dealing with the sermon here. Remember that often you will have the privilege of leading the whole service of worship. You need to consider how you use your words and your voice to lead people into a realisation of God's presence; to address God in prayer; to introduce hymns and even to create a feeling of welcome and inclusion for the church family.

There now, I hope that's given you something to think about and I hope that it has been helpful – but probably not half as helpful to you as that lady was.