We have a book at home called, ‘Why men don’t listen and why women can’t read maps.’ I guess we bought it because in my household I’ve often been accused of not listening, and my wife certainly finds map reading difficult. As a priest my job involves a lot of focussed listening, and when I work hard at it I’m quite good. But often when I get home I’m not so good. My wife wants to share all about her day, when the children were younger they’d want to talk too. When I listen I find often I’ve missed stuff, maybe I’ve been thinking about something else, ‘having a conversation in my head’ and tune in a little late. Sometimes that gets noticed and over 30 years of happy marriage we’ve had a good few conversations about it! Now I have two adult daughters its even worse. Multi track chats go on which leave my Neanderthal brain far behind. I’ll try and join in and find them looking at me blankly, as they’ve already moved on.

Apparently, I’m not alone. On average men, talk, listen and bond in different ways from most women, most of the time.

That doesn’t mean we’re not equal, just different. I haven’t gone into detail about my wife and map reading, or sense of direction in general. She has many gifts but that is not one of them, which she would freely admit. Her mother by contrast has great sense of direction, as many do, but on average most women find this more difficult than most men.

These kind of differences are the stuff of married life and TV sitcoms. Almost half of marriages fail in this country and the ability be open about our differences and how they can make us feel is essential to getting along well long term.
In some ways modern life has made these differences more obvious. In many traditional cultures women will spend a lot of their time with other women and will have more opportunities to talk and to listen than a Western woman may do today at home alone or with young children, or working, quite properly alongside men as well as women. Couples can come back home, to a street where they know few others, looking to find all their needs supplied by their partner alone. The strain may be obvious.

Add into that mix smartphones and technology and we soon have couples spending most of their time at the table, or even in restaurants looking at their phones instead of each other, looking at Facebook instead of their children. You could argue that this is a new way of living with a community of friends, and perhaps it can be. But I know it also erodes real live human interaction and makes my ability to listen well even worse.

In 2 Corinthians Paul talks of us having ‘unveiled faces.’ Being open to what we are hearing, open to one another and open to God. There were no smartphones in his day, but plenty of distractions. Complicated laws, religious and otherwise. Pagan governments and multiple religions. People could be so stuck in their ways and traditions that they were unable to hear the message or recognise God’s truth when it came to them. The conversations in their own head were too loud for them to hear the still small voice of God. St Paul talks of the ‘god of this world,’ ‘the fashionable god of this time’ obscuring the minds of people to the Good News of God in Jesus.

What are the fashionable gods of our own time? Perhaps one of the strongest is self-fulfilment. It’s taken as read that that is what life is all about. Fulfilling your potential. Having a dream and going for it. Getting good grades. Going to Oxford. Getting on. But for what?
Depression and mental illness is much higher amongst students today than it used to be twenty years ago. There are many reasons for this but here may be one of them. If everything is aimed at being perfectly fulfilled, stretched and satisfied, then we will never be happy. Because we never are perfectly fulfilled, stretched or satisfied!

The Christian gospel is paradox. Its all about love yes, but a love that gives itself away, a love that is that is self-sacrificial. Giving yourself to bring life to others, as we follow a Lord who gave himself to bring life to you and me. Generally its in giving that we receive, in forgiving others that we are pardoned and finally in dying that we are born to eternal life.

As Paul says today, ‘We do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake.’ Its not all about us and our happiness and fulfilment. In chasing that we end up chasing the wind. Happiness comes to find us when we look to serve other people for Jesus’ sake. ‘For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.’

‘Slaves for Jesus’ sake’. That’s a disruptive picture for Paul to use. Slaves served others in ordinary, boring, hard and difficult ways. Paul says that is our model. That’s what life is really about. That’s what love in marriage has to mean. Not just red roses, but doing the hoovering. Not just what do I need, but what can I give? Not just looking at BBC Sport on my Iphone, but stopping and looking and listening.
Seeing the glory of God in the face of my wife, my father, my friend or my colleague.

Seeing that glory and paying attention. Learning to love. Learning to listen.

Ash Wednesday is in a few days time. What will you be doing for Lent? Perhaps I’ll turn off my iphone and learn to live without it..make some space to ‘be in the room’ properly with whoever I’m with. To stop, look and listen.

One way or another it’s a time when we’re invited to simplify our lives. To pay more attention to God, to the needs of the world, and to the people around us.

Seeing the glory and paying attention.

Learning to love. Learning to listen.