

Listen, so that you may live. (Is 55:3)

Listening to God in the Old Testament: Contexts and Ways

The bible mentions listening of a human being to God explicitly for the first time in the Ancestral Stories. It takes place, after the first human couple has eaten from the Tree of Knowledge:

When they heard the sound of the Lord God walking about in the garden at the breezy time of the day, the man and his wife hid themselves from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. The Lord God then called to the man and asked him: Where are you? ¹⁰ He answered, **“I heard you** in the garden; but I was afraid, because I was naked, so I hid (Gen 3:8-10)^{1.}”

This episode illustrates three features that emerge from listening to God on the part of the human being. The first one comprises the human’s ability to respond to divine revelation, even if it does not happen through words, as part of the process of God’s communication with human beings. The second feature consists of the ability to hear God and this one does not disappear but is still there even after the violation of the divine covenant. The third one refers to the act of listening, which is not only a passive catching of sound waves² but a skill that involves the innermost being of the person and could lead to subsequent actions.

From the beginning, the theological perspective of listening becomes apparent. The development of the identity of each human person and also of humanity as the other and God’s communication partner, hinges on listening. The practice of listening determines if the existence of man in the world and history is realized according to the plan of God. If the listening to God approaching in the garden prompts the rebellious and naked human couple to hide and to distant themselves from God, then this is also exactly what makes them available for the listening as preventive act that allows them to reconnect with God; and that the return to God and receiving of life made possible, just as the prophet’s comforting words at the end of the exile: “Pay attention and come to me; listen, that you may have life (Is 55:3)..” In this same vein stands the plea of universal scope with which the Rule of St. Benedict starts:

“Listen carefully, my son, to the master’s instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart. This is the advice from a father who loves you; welcome it, and faithfully put it into practice. The labor of obedience will bring you back to him from whom you had drifted through the sloth of disobedience” (Prol 1-3)

The listening to God is introduced as an act of beginning, a life query, as a “special way of existence.” It includes the whole human being, beginning from its innermost being –“listen with the ear of your heart”- and shapes its actions, which are aimed totally at following the divine commandments. On the other hand, the one who listens to the voice of the Lord with astounded

¹ Note of translator: All Scripture citations taken from New American Bible Revised Edition

² Im Italienischen werden für das Hören drei Verben gebraucht, die nur scheinbar Synonyme sind: *udire* ist das passive Aufnehmen von Botschaften, die von außen kommen; *sentire* ist eine Aufnahme, die ein gewisses emotionales Mitgehen beinhaltet; *ascoltare* ist der freiwillige Akt des Hinhörens und der Interpretation einer Botschaft. Mögliche Übersetzung ins Deutsche: *hören* (passiv), *hinhören* und *zuhören*.

ears, receives the Word of the Scriptures and the Gospels, which show him the path of life and so lead him, so that he possesses eternal life (cf Prol 8-20). At the end, the listening to the word of God and the living according to his word, result in turning back to the relationship and the trust with God, an event, that contain reassurance of divine care for the human being: "Once you have done this, my eyes will be upon you and my ears will listen for your prayers; and even before you ask me, I will say to you: Here I am" (Prol 18). The perspective of life, which the Prologue reveals, comes entirely from the Scriptures and the listening forms its core.

My lecture deals primarily with the listening as an event that marks God's manifestation in the history of revelation and I will analyze more in depth three stories from the Old Testament: the inception of king Solomon, the call and prophetic mission, the listening within the cult. In these stories meaningful and inspiring landmarks emerge to learn and to improve the listening to God.

1. God, the Lord, who hears and admonishes to listen

A basic process of communication is at work in the history of revelation. Everything comes forth from God and through his word he has created the universe and the human being (Gen 1:1-2,4a). God's word shows his active power which brings about all things and gifts to the created world rhythm and harmony. But not just that, God speaks to the human being who is created in God's image and is his counterpart (Gen 1:26f), with man and woman, he touches them with words of blessing (Gen 1:28) and turns them into capable communication partners who are able to listen and to respond.

In the second creation story (Gen 2: 4b-25), the dynamics of communication are expressed with more imagery as God is forming humankind not only with his own hands but also breathes the breath of life into him that gives him life.

So does God speak and touch the human race with his word and the human beings are created in a way that they can hear the divine language and respond to it. The divine communication stretches for the dialogue that is to take place with humanity; in fact, the divine blessing and its full impact can only unfold if God can be recognized and heard.

In comparison with the divine intervention and prerequisite, the story of our ancestors on the part of the human being is strewn with dawning self-understanding, going astray, and breakups and renewed listening. God evidences steadfast attention on his part, which is renewed continually, as he searches for ways to dialogue with the truly privy and free partner and wants to revitalize it at any cost.

In the communication that God assumes, the listening presents as an essential dimension in creating a dialogue which can be truly mutual, in which God also listens and invites to listen.

1.1. The listening God

God listens to the events and in worship.

The God of Israel is characterized by hearing the cry of the oppressed and the longsuffering righteous and he intervenes to liberate them. As the complaints of the enslaved Israelites in Egypt rise up to God, he hears their cries (Ex 2:23-24; 3:7) und sends Moses with a plan to liberate them.

Each time when an individual or collective cry for help rises out of arrogance, injustice or an overstepping of law, God listens attentively and acts to save³.

A distinct feature of God's appearance also is that he hears the prayer of the righteous (Prov 15:29; Ps 34: 16,18; 66,19) and acts to free them from fear and any act of violence. God turns toward the poor and abused and is benevolent toward them (Ex 22:26).

Conversely, the resistance and trespasses of the human being can turn into obstacles and remove from God, whom they provoke to anger (cf Num 11:1) or they hinder God to listen (cf Is 59:1-2). In other cases, God refuses to listen or threatens this when the worship is hypocritical and only superficial or when the people of God fall away and turn to other gods (cf Is 1:15; Jer 11:11, 14, 14:12; Ez 8:18).

Following this reasoning, three considerations can be undertaken.

1. An essential trait of the God of Israel, that really is unique, lies in the fact that he hears. Whatever the tribes or individuals view as deities are actually beings without life, utterly powerless and passive (cf Ps 115:6; Is 44:9-20). The Lord is the only trustworthy God because those who trust him will surely be heard:

Know that the Lord works wonders for his faithful one;
the Lord hears when I call out to him. (Ps 4:4)

2. God hears the cry of the downtrodden, the poor and the oppressed and he listens to them full of mercy as he frees them from all their fears.

The Lord is near to all who call upon him,
to all who call upon him in truth.
He fulfills the desire of those who fear him;
he hears their cry and saves them. (Ps 145: 18-19).

3. The hearing on God's part always connects and transforms into divine actions with the aim to rescue. The listening moves God to act and he employs human co-workers (like Moses for the liberation of the Israelites). This method demands awareness from the human being to discover the ways and to walk in them through which God's goodness and his hearing of prayers are revealed in the miracle of deliverance.

Hear my voice, LORD, when I call;
have mercy on me and answer me. (...)
Lord, show me your way;
lead me on a level path
because of my enemies. (Ps 27:7,11)

1.2. The Summons to listen in the context of the Covenant

The revelation at Sinai/Horeb is an event that essentially surfaces from the listening. God reveals himself on the mountain by letting his voice be heard (cf Ex 19:19b; Dtn 4; 10-12) and invites to

³ Einige Beispiele sind unter anderem: Hagar in Gen. 16,11; der König Hiskija in 2 Kön. 20,5; das Volk in Zef. 2,8f.; und die Gerechten und die Gottesfürchtigen in Mal. 3,16.

listen. With the arrival of the Israelites at the mountain, God would like a new phase of the common living to start, namely the new covenant. The listening is the first prerequisite to enter into the covenant, which God offers his people:

You have seen how I treated the Egyptians and how I bore you up on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now, if you obey me completely and keep my covenant, you will be my treasured possession among all peoples, though all the earth is mine. You will be to me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation. That is what you must tell the Israelites. (Ex 19:4-6).

God takes the initiative for the covenant after the miracle of the exodus out of Egypt, through which God protected and saved his people by raising it to himself. The event of the covenant takes on form within the divine plan to increase the closeness and belonging between God and the Israelites. The call to listen is linguistically formulated by an amplified doubling (literally: *when you listen listening*) and immediately the invitation to keep the covenant follows, that is to fulfill the commandments. The life of the covenant requires from the Israelites to turn to God freely and exclusively, who liberated them to listen to the divine voice and to obey to what they heard. This episode through which God claims Israel as his own, stresses the relationship out of which Israel will become the people of God, and it simultaneously emphasizes the authority of God's royal dignity and the fact that it is exactly this covenant which will secure Israel's identity and freedom. By accepting the covenant, Israel becomes God's special possession and the personal treasure of the Lord as the universal king, it becomes a kingdom of priests, a kingdom in which all inhabitants are "priests" with the privilege of a special closeness with God and it will become a "holy people," that distinguishes itself by participation in the glory of God (Lev 19:2) and the commitment to the worship.

The reactions of the people unfold in three replies (Ex 19: 8, 24; 3,7) which express the acceptance and commitment in response to the divine appearance and the transmission of the words of the Lord. The third explanation of the Israelites after the drawing up and reading of God's words in the Book of the Covenant by Moses is the clearest one: "*All that the Lord has said, we will hear and do.*" (Ex 24:7). The unusual change in the sequence of the action, first acting and then listening, is a hint that we need to act out God's words to understand them after we put them into action, we will hear them again and accomplish them anew. The revelation through which God spoke and the people heard his voice and committed themselves to the word of God, is a beginning, whereas the acceptance has to be an ongoing endeavor. The human actions continue the revelation and accomplish them. Israel realized its dignity in its history as "holy people" at the time and to the extent in which it heard God's word, which it committed itself to fulfill by listening to the voice of God and putting the divine words into action. By giving God their ear, Israel will turn into what it already is, from Sinai and God's Sinai, namely the people of the Lord.

The listening is key for the communion of the life under the covenant since Sinai and afterwards so that any violation of the covenant primarily consists and can be measured in the people's neglect of the listening to God's word, which causes chain reactions of false attempts⁴. From the refusal to listen to God, betrayal and desertion result, the fracture of the covenant, which leads Israel into catastrophe, into exile. Finally, the return to God through listening to the divine voice is made possible again:

⁴ Cf. beispielsweise Jer. 11, 1-14.

(...) and return to the Lord, your God, obeying his voice, according to all that I am commanding you today, you and your children, **with your whole heart** and your whole being, ³ the Lord, your God, will restore your fortunes and will have compassion on you; he will again gather you from all the peoples where the Lord, your God, has scattered you (Deut 30:2-3). ⁵

After this post-exilic teaching of Deuteronomy, remorse and conversion require concretely a radical change through which one changes and gives respect from one's heart to the voice of God with full dedication, which also reaches the deepest dimensions inside of the human being, the most intimate inwardness of each individual. The people express recognition, understanding and knowledge of God through the listening with their whole heart and accept his instructions at the same time. In this way, God can respond with salvation and forgiveness and proclaim a rich and good future:

You, however, shall again obey the voice of the Lord and observe all his commandments which I am giving you today. Then the Lord, your God, will generously increase your undertakings, the fruit of your womb, the offspring of your livestock, and the produce of your soil; for the Lord, your God, will again take delight in your prosperity, just as he took delight in your ancestors', because you will obey the voice of the Lord, your God, keeping the **commandments and statutes** that are written in this book of the law, when you return to the Lord, your God, with your whole heart and your whole being (Deut 30:8-10).

In every generation, Israel will be restored as the people of God even after violating the covenant, if it only listens to the voice of God in the Torah, but "listening" signifies that they accept the Torah and follow the commandments, an appreciation and knowledge of God. This action fills God with joy for his people (Deut 30:9), just as the groom rejoices over the bride (Isaiah 62:5; Jer 33:11; Zef 3:17).

At this point, some further reflection is possible.

- 1) God lets his voice be heard at Sinai, he reveals himself through words, which are likely to be heard and received. God, who has revealed himself via a voice, which can be understood in human language (Ex 19,19b), **approaches Israel himself**. As soon as Israel hears his voice, it is raised and employed as God's people. Communion takes on shape in this relationship. An 18th century Chassidic master commented fittingly:

"Our main link to God is through words – words of Torah and prayer. Every single letter [in these words] has an inner spiritual essence. You must attach your thoughts and your innermost being to this essence. This is the mystery of «Let

⁵ Cf. auch Dtn. 4, 30f: „Wenn du in Not bist, werden alle diese Worte dich finden. In späteren Tagen wirst du zum Herrn, deinem Gott zurückkehren und auf seine Stimme hören. Denn der Herr, dein Gott, ist ein barmherziger Gott. Er lässt dich nicht fallen und gibt dich nicht dem Verderben preis und vergisst nicht den Bund mit deinen Vätern, den er ihnen geschworen hat.“

Him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth » (Song of Songs 1:2) – the attachment of spirit to spirit.” (Kether Shem Tov 44)⁶

- 2) The listening to the divine words as response of total attention and acceptance requires that the words are being translated into action; only in this way can vitality, life, goodness and the promised blessing of the covenant with God shine forth (Deut 11:26f; 28: 1-14, 30:8-10). Just as soon as one puts God’s words into action, they will be heard again (Ex 24:7). Although God revealed the words of the Torah completely and comprehensively, their discovery and understanding encompasses on part of the human being the whole of life and history, from one event to the next, from one generation to the next, just as one candle is being ignited by another.

2. Contexts and Ways of hearing God

2.1. The King with the Listening Heart and the Benevolent Ruler

As he ascends the throne, King Solomon goes into the sanctuary of Gibeon to receive a word from God, according to the rite of sleeping in the sanctuary, about which some other passages in the Syro -Canaanite literature report. And God appears to him in a dream to fulfill a wish for him. Opposite to what the average reader would expect, Solomon neither asks for a long life nor for wealth or victory over his enemies; rather he says:

Give your servant, therefore, a listening heart to judge your people and to distinguish between good and evil. (1 Kings 3:9a).

God praises Solomon’s request who desires right discretion and to act justly and right in his reign.

I now do as you request. **I give you a heart so wise and discerning** that there has never been anyone like you until now, nor after you will there be anyone to equal you. In addition, I give you what you have not asked for: I give you such riches and glory that among kings there will be no one like you all your days. (1 Kings 3:12-13.)

The “listening heart, “is the determining prerequisite for young Solomon to govern and judge his kingdom. In biblical anthropology, the heart is not the seat of feelings and emotions but the organ of the intellect and identity as a person. Ripening in the heart are planning and decision-making and out of them flow decisions and resolutions. The heart is the place at which the human being “hears” the triggers that come from the outside and it checks and understands and reacts to them. The heart is the organ with which God “is heard”, in which real dedication to God

⁶ “Our main link to God is through words – words of Torah and prayer. Every single letter [in these words] has an inner spiritual essence. You must attach your thoughts and your innermost being to this essence. This is the mystery of «Let Him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth » (Song of Songs 1:2) – the attachment of spirit to spirit.” (Kether Shem Tov 44)

is shown⁷ and with the help of the heart the order of the world and life according to divine teachings can be recognized.

Solomon receives from God exactly that what he requested, the gift of a wise heart which is able to recognize and to distinguish and additionally, wealth, honor and long life (cf. also 1Kings 5:9; 10,24).

Immediately following this story (1 Kings 3:16-28), Solomon is confronted with a difficult question of law, which allows for a demonstration of his wisdom. The case of the two women who both want to claim a living child as their son, presents a seemingly unsolvable problem. The king comprehends, through his ability to listen to the speeches of the two women, who the mother is and he devises a **strategic** plan aimed at **making this visible** publically. Through this accomplishment in the area of justice, King Solomon gains the respect and reverence of the people, who recognize in him the wisdom of God to make fair judgments.

These two just cited episodes allow for some more reflection.

- 1) The dialogue between God and Solomon in the sanctuary is surely an expression of the rich theology of the ideal reign of a king, which is depending on the Lord (see Deut 17:14-20) and the privileges of the Davidic dynasty (see 2 Sam 7). Therefore, Solomon is viewing himself as “servant” of the Lord who is called to reign over the people of God (1 Kings 3; 8:9) and who wants to follow the example of his father David who had gone before the Lord in fidelity, justice and righteousness of heart (2 Kings 3:6). Solomon would like to develop the office of government in the service of the Lord, in connection and attachment and he prays for “a hearing heart” to distinguish, reign and guide according to the gifts which God promised in the covenant and that he would like to realize for his people (1 Kings 8:56-61). To be able to rule the people of the Lord, Solomon needs inside himself, in his heart, the ability of awareness and reflection; he must be open, receptive, astute, and careful and permeated by God. Since David is elected king, because God is looking into the heart (1 Sam 16:7), he can develop his personal qualities as a leader since God put into his heart divine wisdom (cf 1 Kings 10:24).
- 2) In the wisdom tradition, the theme of the wise and discerning heart can, in a universal sense, be followed in the continuous motif of listening on the basis of gaining wisdom (see Prov 1:5; 22:17; 23:19). The pondering on wisdom explains especially that the use of the heart as an organ of wisdom, is the fruit of human efforts and also God’s gift:

My son, if you receive my words
and treasure my commands, Turning your ear to wisdom,
inclining your heart to understanding;
Yes, if you call for intelligence,
and to understanding raise your voice;
If you seek her like silver,
and like hidden treasures search her out,
Then will you understand the fear of the LORD;
the knowledge of God you will find;

⁷ Cf. unter anderem 1Kön. 8,61; 11,4; 15,3.14.

For the LORD gives wisdom,
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding;
He has success in store for the upright,
is the shield of those who walk honestly,
Guarding the paths of justice,
protecting the way of his faithful ones,
Then you will understand what is right and just,
what is fair, every good path;
For wisdom will enter your heart,
knowledge will be at home in your soul. (Prov 2:1-10)

In this way, the human heart is continuously directed and cultivated in its efforts to stretch toward the miraculous good, which lies in the recognition and wisdom of God, who loves the one who loves these divine gifts and who lets himself be found by those who seek the truth (cf Prov 8:12-21). The one who finds wisdom gains the life and the favor of the Lord (Prov 8:35). Ultimately, the path to development of listening to wisdom requires some ongoing practice (Prov 8:32-34) and one does not reach an endpoint but is always evolving:

The heart of the intelligent acquires knowledge,
and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge (Prov 18:15; cf also 15:14).

- 3) The manner in which Solomon enters this legal dispute, offers us some starting points concerning the importance of the stance of listening to find solutions for human conflicts (cf Prov 15:31f; 19:20; 25:10). The opposite positions and the dispute between humans come about and magnify themselves within a dysfunctional and derailed communication, which is locked in a static and self-centered logic. If the activation of the listening is successful, it can be the key to solving conflicts constructively. In fact, the hearing allows the creation of a circumstance, in which the parties either directly or with mediation gain the perspective of **the other** and this enables them, too, to find solutions acceptable for both sides. Over and above, for the future, this process can teach how one can listen and learn not to have conflicts escalate when disputes arise and have them turn into destructive discord.

2.2. Listening as part of the Vocation and Mission of the Prophets

God lets his word be heard through the prophets throughout revelation history; the prophets are God's mouthpiece. Moses is the prototype (Deut 18:15-22). The hearing of God is the origin and motivation of all prophetic acts.

The prophetic acts flow out of the divine call and demand good maturity and readiness to listen on the part of the human. From this perspective, the prophet Samuel presents a special example. In the story of young Samuel, who is growing up in fulfillment of his mother's vow to God in the sanctuary of Shiloh under the tutelage of Eli to serve the Lord (1 Sam 2:21; 3:1), the author mentions that Samuel *did not know the word of the Lord because it had not been revealed to him yet* (1 Sam 3:7). This means, that Samuel did not have a personal experience with God yet. In fact,

Samuel runs to Eli during the night when God calls him (1 Sam 3:1-14) since he believes that the old priest had called him but Eli sends him back to sleep. This is repeated three times until Eli understands that it was the Lord who called the boy and he teaches Samuel what to respond when the call is coming again: *Speak Lord, because your servant is listening*. Samuel follows these directions and the Lord reveals to him the tragic end of Eli's family.

Every prophetic vocation has its origin in strong personal God-experiences through which the one who is called consciously shows readiness to serve, to accomplish the divine order. In this case, one recognizes how important Eli's behavior is to lead Samuel to the Lord. It took time for Eli also to understand that it was God's voice, which called Samuel. This circumstance can be explained from different intentions. It is mentioned at the beginning already: *In those days the words of the Lord were rare* (1 Sam 3:1) additionally, the malice of Elis' sons and the moral decay of his house was great and obvious (cf 1 Sam 2:12-36). One can view the situation from a generational point at which the already elderly Eli (cf 1 Sam 2:22; 3:2) is confronted with the young Samuel; or from an institutional standpoint where the priestly service of Eli's family is followed by the priest-prophet-judge; but in any case, one has to acknowledge that Eli still has the ability, to orient Samuel toward the encounter with God so that Samuel will prepare himself to hear the Lord and to serve him.

Samuel is characterized by the zeal with which he responds when he feels himself called, and he runs three times to old Eli, very attentive and obedient, which is in contrast to the sons of Eli, who do not want to listen to their father (1 Sam 2:25).

Samuel can listen to Eli and be open to listening to God, which is an event that completely changed his person and his life in the service of God. This emphasizes that listening of the prophet to God is not only done with their human ability to hear, but it refines and enhances their listening ability. Other examples in this sense, which appear in the Samuel narratives, are significant in relation to the controversial issue of the monarchy. As occurs under the political vicissitudes, which Samuel finds himself confronted with, there is the demand of the Israelites to have a king like the other nations (1 Sam 8). Samuel discusses and criticizes such a project, which apparently represents a contrast to the covenant of the people with the Lord, as it could lead astray in despotic ways and redefine the political leadership, as it has been exercised by Samuel himself. The people, however, insist on their claim, and Samuel receives God's word, who invites him to hear and to agree to this requirement with which the people are going to reject God and not Samuel, and to warn the Israelites of the consequences (1 Sam 8: 7,9,21f.). Samuel is able to overcome his own irritation and to conform to the word of God, which enables him to lead this process of institutional differentiation. The goal is to help the people to understand that the approval of a king in such a way should not lead to letting go of their loyalty to God. It is revealed to Samuel that Saul will come, who is chosen by God as a ruler for his people (1 Sam 9: 15f) and he achieves the divine words by anointing and transmitting to Saul the word of God about his new role (1 Sam 9:27-10:8). When the people finally acknowledges Saul as king, Samuel is present to confirm the kingdom of God and to encourage Israel to have listening to the Lord as their first priority and to serve him faithfully:

(...) even though the LORD your God is your king. Now here is the king you chose. See! The LORD has given you a king. If you fear and serve the LORD, if you listen to the voice of the LORD and do not rebel against the LORD's command, if both you and the king, who rules over you, follow the LORD your God—well and good. But if you do not listen to the voice of the LORD and if you rebel against the LORD's

command, the hand of the LORD will be against you and your king (1 Sam 12:12-15).

Through listening to the Lord, Samuel exceeds his own human vision and opens himself for the divine perspective to make the Israelites understand that they are not going to be like the other nations, but remain the Lord's people and the people of the covenant. This fact also determines the status of the new king, under the authority of the Lord⁸, and he and the people will jointly reap the fruit of their decision. The king and the people form a single unit before God. Safety, prosperity and freedom will hinge on whether they listen to the Word of God and fulfill it or meet it with resistance.

Just as Samuel listens to the Word of God to fulfill it and thus actively contributes to the realization of the divine plan in which his prophetic task becomes clear (cf 1 Sam 3:19), so depend any positive consequences of the new institutional organization only on whether the people and the human king hear the words of God and fulfill them.

All these events show how the listening to God can mature Samuel's perception and actions in relation to the demands of the people. The prophet can participate in God's perspective through his listening, and he warns the Israelites to go an analog way of understanding and developing the institution of a human king without abandoning the fundamental bond with the Lord, which is the source of their identity and life.

2.3. The Prophet as Disciple with an Open Ear

The third Servant Song (Is 50:4-11) is generally attributed to Deutero-Isaiah due to its autobiographical form, this is the same prophet, to whom we also owe the second Servant Song at the end of the exile (Is 49:1-6).

In such a dramatic time, such as the exile, the experience of listening to the word of God of which the Prophet reports, becomes significant in a particular way. The prophet identifies with those whose ears God has opened and who hear the word day-by-day just as disciples hear (Is 50:4ff). The term disciple (*limmud*) is passive form of the verb to learn/to teach (*lamad*), and in an earlier statement the prophet Isaiah had entitled those his disciples, who bind the prophetic word in their hearts as with a seal (Is 8: 16). In this context, the anonymous prophet of the exile is also a disciple of the ancient prophets. He draws constantly from their words when he sees the truth of their message confirmed by history, and at the same time he announces without delay the teachings with which God wakes him daily. Even his language is the language of the disciple who is learning afresh constantly and always and encourages and supports the ones who are exhausted by the tragedy, so that their trust and hope in God to stay strong.

In addition, the prophet in exile suffers like all Israelites and is being mocked just like them. But just as in the constant willingness to listen to God, he recognizes God's closeness and help. Despite everything, he can face the trials with determination and feels justified to pursue the ministry God has given him in a dark and difficult time (Is 50:7-9).

⁸ Cf. auch Dtn. 17, 14-20.

At this point, one can make several observations.

1. The prophetic identity and the prophetic mission develop themselves only in the availability of the one who is called to listen to God, and to make God **be heard** to those to whom he is sent. The prophet is gripped and captured by the word of the Lord. By listening to the word of God, which breaks into his life, he learns to know the Lord and to be in his service. Listening creates unity and the direct connection with God as well as the ability of the prophet hang in with God in everything he does.
2. Listening to God transforms and expands the human perspective. The vision of reality of the human is always limited, partial, and it carries the risk that one's actions show some stepping backwards, of being stuck in history. If the human point of view opens up and takes in God's perspective, human projects receive direction and potency that lead to life.
3. Although the prophet is constantly listening to God, he remains humble. Like a disciple with attentive ears, he is ready to learn daily, to hear the story of salvation and to recognize God's ways in the present moment. The prophet is introduced as a role model. He anticipates what the whole nation is called to do (see Num 11:29; Joel 3:1-5) as the people of God have a prophetic task among all the peoples, namely, to give witness of God's salvation and to proclaim it to the ends of the earth (cf Is 49:1-6).⁹

3. Hearing God in Worship

Worship and prayer are visible expressions of the direct encounter and the dialogue between God and the people (as a whole but also as individuals).

When the people encounter God in worship and are aware of God's presence, they will receive as a gift, *eyes, that see, ears, that hear, and a heart, that understands*, so that they are able to perceive the miracle of divine salvation in the events of history (Deut 29:3; cf Is 6:1-11). The encounter of God provokes an anthropologic transformation that enables to recognize the Lord who works the redemption and introduces into the communion of life. Then the human being can celebrate the Lord in praise and call on him confidently in times of fear.

Appearing in a special way in the intensive dialogue of prayer, as attested in the psalter, are the mutual invocation of God and the petitioner and, on the other hand, the gratitude of the person for answered prayers by God become apparent.

I would like to mention two examples to illustrate this point.

3.1. Oh, that today you would hear his voice! (Ps 95:7)

Psalm 95 contains in its first part (verses 1-7b) the invitation to enter the temple, to perform the liturgical service, to approach God with adoration, petitions and praise. It is about acknowledging God with joy as the great king, the creator of the world and of Israel, who strongly supports and guides the universe. In thanksgiving, Israel names the indelible gift of the

⁹ Cf. auch Ps. 44,2; 78, 1-4.

covenant and celebrates the mutual belonging that is expressed through the image of God as king and shepherd, who cares for his people.¹⁰

The second half of the psalm holds a very different content. It draws attention to the liturgical warning to listen (verse 7c): *If today you would hear his voice! Or: listen to his voice today!* This plea surprisingly follows a strong admonition by God to his people; in fact, as a prophetic utterance (verses 8-11):

Do not harden your hearts as at Meribah,
as on the day of Massah in the desert.
There your ancestors tested me;
they tried me though they had seen my works.
Forty years I loathed that generation;
I said: "This people's heart goes astray;
they do not know my ways."
Therefore I swore in my anger:
"They shall never enter my rest."

The divine warning calls the worshipping community not imitate the generation in the desert who had seen how God performed miracles for their benefit and then rebelled anyway, they challenged and to tested him (cf Ex 17:1-7; Num 20:8-13). God is disgusted with this generation that has closed themselves off and turns their hearts away without recognizing the Lord's ways. Such persistent refusal prevents that this generation will move into the Promised Land, which in the divine words is referred to as *the place of my rest*, the very place at which life can unfold in total safety from the enemies (Deut 12:9-10; 25:19; Jos 1:13; 21:44; 23:1).

The drama of the generation of rebellious past, with the hardened and erring hearts, since they refused to listen to God (see Ps 81:9,12) is remembered in the presence of community, which celebrates before God so that they may learn from it and turn to God resolutely. In fact, in the listening to the divine voice the bond and fidelity of the people to God becomes concrete and this leads to the enjoyment of the favors and the blessings of God (cf Ps 81: 14-17).

The community of the covenant becomes reality in the present and the past of every generation if the community and/or each individual in the *today* of the liturgy, in the turning to God takes in the teachings, which God wants them/him to hear and realize them. The attentiveness to fidelity is being strengthened and the community improves its understanding of the divine actions and the divine ways in the human events in each celebration and this leads to recognition of God as *Rock of our salvation*.

3.2. You opened my ear (Ps. 40.7)

Psalm 40 brings another remarkable perspective in the expression of thanksgiving of a petitioner for the good received from God (verses 1-10). The thanksgiving precedes the plea in this psalm (verses 11-18)¹¹ and, doubtless the stress is put on the thanksgiving through the

¹⁰ Cf. Ps. 23; 77,20; 78,52; 80,1; 100,3; Jes. 53,6; Ez. 34, 11-16.

¹¹ Üblicherweise geht die Klage oder der Bezug auf die angstauslösende Situation dem Dank voraus (cf. Ps. 22; 116). Die Inversion in Ps. 40 nährt eine dauerhafte Diskussion in der Exegese über die Einheit des Psalms oder

order of these two themes and their development. The petitioner gives thanks by acknowledging the benefactions received and, simultaneously, the thanksgiving also anticipates the liberation from the current distress, which is prayed for with trust for the present moment.

Surely, I wait for the Lord;
who bends down to me and hears my cry,
Draws me up from the pit of destruction,
out of the muddy clay,
Sets my feet upon rock,
steadies my steps,
And puts a new song in my mouth,
a hymn to our God.
Many shall look on in fear
and they shall trust in the Lord. (Ps 40:1-4)

In some serious danger to life, the worshipper who strongly trusts and hopes in the Lord, has survived the threat to his life that probably subjected him to lies and persecution. Therefore, he lifts up his voice with a new song of liberation in front of the community: he praises and thanks and gives witness for what God has done for him. This liturgical act of praise is part of the feast of the victim of the *todah*, the thanksgiving (cf Lev 7:11-15) for having escaped the danger, for the renewed gift of life (cf Ps 100; 116). But in this scenario, the worshipper offers himself as a sacrifice instead of the sacrifice that corresponds to the ritual or other sacrifices that are provided for the main worries:

Sacrifice and offering you do not want;
you opened my ears.
Holocaust and sin-offering you do not request;
so I said, "See; I come
with an inscribed scroll written upon me.
I delight to do your will, my God;
your law is in my inner being!" (Ps 40: 7-9)

This is not merely about the criticism of the system of sacrifice but about its reorganization. In this case the sacrifice does not satisfy the desire of the worshipper who wants to please God. The worshipper understands that God has *implanted hearing in him*, God has given him the tools to listen, and he has removed the obstacles that used to block his understanding.¹² God prefers the listening to his words to the sacrifices¹³; he likes it when someone follows his guidance, his Torah, and puts them into action. The listening unites deeper with God than sacrifices. There is no automatic connection between the sacrifice, human integrity and divine approval. Hence, the worshipper expresses his gratitude not with sacrifices but by explaining that he will offer himself:

die Kombination zweier unabhängiger Kompositionen, und zwar umso mehr, als die Verse 14-17 fast wörtlich mit Ps. 70 übereinstimmen und man andere enge Bezüge mit Ps. 35, 4.26-28 bemerken kann.

¹² Cf. Jes. 6,10; Jer. 6,10; Sach. 7,11.

¹³ Cf. die Worte des Propheten Samuel an Saul (1Sam. 15,22): *Hat der Herr an Brandopfern und Schlachtopfern das gleiche Gefallen wie am Gehorsam gegenüber der Stimme des Herrn? Wahrhaftig, Gehorsam ist besser als Opfer, Hinhören besser als das Fett von Widdern.* Dasselbe Konzept findet sich in Jer. 7, 21-23 unter Bezugnahme auf das, was Gott den Israeliten geboten hat, als sie aus Ägypten auszogen; cf. auch Ps. 50, 8-15; 51, 16-19.

“Here I am,” I said; “send me!” He devotes himself to God totally (cf Is 6:8), by introducing himself with the Torah roll, which is becoming the center of his person, because it is engraved in his innermost being¹⁴ and he is resolved to accept it and to put it into action.

To God, who is listening to him, who rescued him and gave back his life, the petitioner responds with an open ear by offering God that what only he alone can offer God: himself. The fidelity to God is worth more than sacrifices. This determines the value of the liturgical actions and the necessity to raise oneself up through them to the personal relationship with God. This case shows an extraordinary coincidence of the worshipper who enjoys to give God exactly that which finds God’s favor. It is again evidence of the ability of the human being to listen to God and of the delights that break out on both sides, when the ear of the heart is aimed toward God. The attention is subtle and can be compared to a meeting in a love relationship in which the beloved listens and thinks: *The sound of my lover! here he comes leaping across the hills (...)* and the Lover invites her: *My dove in the clefts of the rock, in the secret recesses of the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely*(Songs 2:8,14).”

4. Concluding Remarks

The first point we explored in this lecture focused on God as a subject of listening. As a matter of fact: *Does the one who shaped the ear not hear?* (Ps 94:9). The listening on God’s part is an incomparable act that creates life through the fact that he is hearing the human invocations, shows his nearness, his presence, which liberates, rescues, provides. Beyond this, God’s call to listen offers freedom, community and meaning for the realization of personal and social human living.

The human capability to listen is a divine gift and requires also some practice, an ongoing learning, to develop and concretize it like the here analyzed points show. Usually in the schools, there is mainly emphasis on linguistic competency, on the ability to create correct written and verbal texts but nothing is taught about the process of listening to another person and to events.

The human listening to God is part of a battle to turn to God and, on the other hand, and to listen to God who admonishes: *Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone! Therefore, you shall love the Lord, your God, with your whole heart (...)* Take to heart these words which I command you today. Keep repeating them to your children. Recite them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them on your arm as a sign and let them be as a pendant on your forehead. Write them on the doorposts of your houses and on your gates (Deut 6: 4-9).

To accept God and the divine teachings and to put into action what pleases him, means in the end, to do what he is. In this way the listening of the human being makes the one who realizes it in his own life capable of care of neighbor, able to seek, to wait, to provide a home, to receive, to share, to understand, to support, to unite, to distinguish, to solve conflicts creatively, taking on tasks and to execute them, exploring and opening new horizons and many other things.

Listening is an art that one never stops learning and listening to God is a fundamental decision concerning the direction of our life and a question of love, the abiding in his presence: *Choose*

¹⁴ In der prophetischen Ankündigung bewirkt die göttliche Lehre, die in das Herz eingeschriebene *Tora*, beim Volk die unmittelbare Gotteserkenntnis, und sie ist das Zeichen des neuen Bundes, der nicht mehr aufgehoben werden kann, cf. Jer. 31, 31-34; 32,39; Ez. 11, 19-20; 36, 25-28; Dtn. 6, 6-9; 30, 11-14.

life, then, that you and your descendants may live,²⁰ by loving the Lord, your God, obeying his voice, and holding fast to him. For that will mean life for you, a long life for you to live on the land which the Lord swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give to them (Deut 30:19-20).