

## Reflection

Acts 10:44-48

When I taught first years at University, I was supposed to be teaching them the raw basics of Occupational Therapy. What I inevitably spent almost as much time doing was teaching them how to write a coherent essay. I think almost every student received feedback that was a variation of "the aim of good grammar is to write a sentence that only has one potential meaning." This would be promptly followed by comments about using UK English as Microsoft gets Australian English wrong, and to turn on both grammar and style in the checker.

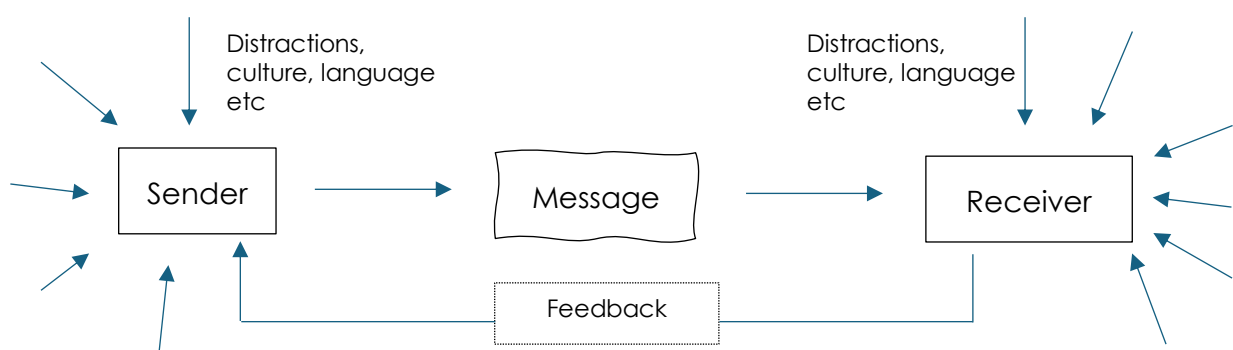
Of course, one of the common mistakes that people make is to assume the message they intend to give is the message the other person hears. Good grammar and writing skills are, in the academic and professional setting, important ways of facilitating this, but when we look at other contexts there are many more barriers that could get in the way of a clear message and therefore there are more strategies we need to use for clear communication.

At the start of each semester I would tell my students that if someone asked me a question, anyone was welcome to answer it. One of the reasons was that, given the age difference, they might be able to explain it using examples that are closer to the other students' life experiences. You see, even being 20 years older than the youngest students meant there was a cultural difference and a difference in life experiences. This changed the way I communicated and of course I did not always get that quite right.

Communication theory now tells us that instead of it simply being:



It is something more like:



So, what does all of this have to do with today's readings?

Well, I was thinking about the Acts reading, since lately we have had a lot from the Gospel and first Epistle of John. At the start of Acts we hear the author's second account of the Ascension and this time (in Acts 1:8) just before Christ is taken up to heaven he says "you will be my witnesses in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." The first seven and a half chapters deal with the mission to Judea and Samaria. In last week's reading we hear of the start of that mission to the "ends of the earth."

However, the very early church faced a few challenges with this concept. For the first fifty or so years (as in while these stories were being written), the church was essentially a weird little Jewish sect. What we read in Acts, and in some of Paul's letters, is the debate that happened about how Gentiles became Christians. The all-important question was whether it was necessary for someone to become a converted Jew in order to become a Christian. The two readings from last week and this week (and the bit that is missed out in between) deal with this question.

The background to today's reading is that Peter was praying in Joppa and had a vision of unclean animals being offered to him. He was told "Get up, kill, and eat." He protests the animals are unclean but is told not to call unclean what God has made clean. Straight after this, the delegation from a Centurion arrives and asks for him to come and share the Gospel with their commander. If there are any doubts about what this message means, we then hear how the Holy Spirit baptised the listeners before Peter was able to do so.

In both last week's and this week's story there is one very clear actor who is depicted as giving instruction in ways the hearers can understand. No, this is not Phillip (last week) or Peter (this week) but rather the Spirit of God and in these stories the author gives a clear message to the early church about what it means to be Christian. The interesting thing about today's story is that it is considered so important that it is told three times – the original story, Peter telling what he saw to Cornelius, and finally to the council in Jerusalem. Just in case the original audience missed the point the first two times, the author writes about it again – it underscores in ways they would have understood – this idea is very important.

Connected to this is the question of how we share the Gospel. Do we share it in ways that people can understand and hear clearly? Phillip did this with the Ethiopian who asked how he could understand what he was reading without someone to explain it to him. Peter starts his teaching of Cornelius by saying "I truly understand the God shows no partiality, but in every nation everyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." Cornelius, who had been excluded from full participation in the Jewish religion is reassured by Peter that he is acceptable as he is to God. By starting in this way, Peter addresses the barrier that Cornelius has experienced and therefore communicates the Gospel in a way that can be understood.

This concept is still relevant for us today. To put it in modern terms, do people need to do the same things that we do in order to be Christian? Do they need to worship with an organ and a four-hymn sandwich, follow the lectionary, or use the same communion liturgy in order to be Christian? And if they do, where do we stop? Do they need to have our culture, language, or clothing? The list could go on.

And equally importantly, how do we communicate the Gospel in ways that can overcome those differences? Depending on the context, this could be about being open to the language of a subculture in our society or perhaps by acknowledging the harms done (and still being done) to different people in the name of Christianity.

How can we limit the movement of the Spirit to the things that we understand? Or to turn this question around, in what ways are we being called to listen to what God is saying in our interactions today? How can we better communicate God's love to those whom we encounter?