Lots of listening and talking in the readings for today.

Just last Sunday in Bible study I was trying to remember the source of the quotation in our first reading. I had thought it was one of the psalms. But no, here it is in Isaiah: “The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens--wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught.”

It’s a good prelude to what James writes: “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes.” And I have made plenty of mistakes as preacher and teacher, as if to make James’s case for him.

Certainly, it’s one of many areas in life in which I find myself grateful for God’s forgiveness, not to mention the slack I have been cut by you and many other parishioners over the years.

Isaiah hits the nail on the head, of course, saying that the key to speaking as one who teaches us to listen as one who is taught. That’s what came up in Bible study a week ago—the importance of listening. He warns of speaking unwisely, as the tongue can steer people in the wrong direction, just as surely as a mishandled rudder can set a ship on the wrong course.

So we pray, we preachers and teachers (and everyone else, for that matter), that God’s “Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts.”

When we have asked God to direct and rule our hearts and then chosen to ignore that divine direction—or simply not have recognized it for what it was—we rediscover the truth James has told us: “All of us make many mistakes.” We shouldn’t be surprised, then, when that happens. But we need to be aware of it, and call a mistake a mistake whenever that happens.

Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12-step programs teem with maxims and slogans and sayings. One of the twelve steps is turning one’s will and one’s life over to the care of God, as one understands God. That means, of course, that the programs do not dictate what that God looks or sounds like or any particular system of belief. In much of the literature the terms “High Power” is substituted for “God” for that very reason.

Unsurprisingly, then, one of the one of the sayings is that God, G-O-D stands for good, orderly direction.

Very close to the words in our Collect today.

Back to James and the mistakes we all make. Actually, further back, to Isaiah. In writing about being taught before teaching, he says simply: “The Lord God helps me,” and makes it clear that God is on our side. And I take that “our side” to mean on the side of us human beings. He wrote as a Jew, and James as a Christian (though he wouldn’t recognize that term), and they both seem to be saying that it’s a tricky business, being human, especially a believing human being. We believe that we’ve received a great treasure—a treasury full of knowledge about God and God’s goodness.

They both warn us—and here’s this preacher’s take on it—against using that knowledge or belief as a club, or even as a gavel, to judge others as inherently wrong.

These days almost every conversation with a stranger—even an acquaintance—is a potential minefield. We’ve always known that we don’t all agree on everything. By a long shot. But it seems that within the past few years the consequences of disagreement have escalated. One wrong word and we find ourselves at odds with the person in front of us; and “at odds” is putting it mildly.

What are we to do? Do we become so careful that we don’t say anything of substance to people whose views are unknown to us? Do we graciously try to help them see that their opinions and views are stupid and misguided?

So here’s the answer, from a teacher who tries to listen as one who is taught: I don’t know. I do know that those words have power in themselves—“I . . . don’t . . . know.” And I sometimes lie by uttering those three little words, meaning that I’ve said “I don’t know” when I think I very well do know. But it’s a start. If we can honestly say, “I don’t know” when someone asks us a pointed question which is really, “You do agree with me, don’t you?” it’s a start.

Listening is more than just keeping our mouths shut, waiting for the other person to stop talking so we can set them straight.

Listening in this sense—Isaiah’s and James’s—is listening to the pain beneath the words, and often beneath the anger that’s being expressed. I’m lousy at it, to tell you the truth. It doesn’t keep me from trying, and I thank God for the grace to keep trying to be a good listener, and I think I’m better at it than I used to be, though that’s setting the bar pretty low.

Hearing someone’s fear and hurt behind and beneath their words is what Isaiah and James and Jesus are telling us. Maybe that’s part of what the Messianic secret is about, when Jesus tells his friends not to say anything about the upcoming events, specifically the crucifixion and resurrection,

He might be telling them to listen to what their opponents have to say rather than to try to explain everything ahead of time. We might say he’s urging them to listen rather than pass down judgment and wisdom from on high, as the Pharisees were accustomed to doing. Jesus knew that everything had to unfold in just the way that it did and that those actions would speak louder than any words. (One of James’s themes, by the way.)

He seems to be telling them that it will all come out in the wash. Or at the last day. Or in the Final Judgment. Or something like that. And that, he says elsewhere, is up to God and not us. And thank God for that.

Meanwhile, we are called to listen to each other, and to the world, with all our ears and hearts and souls, before we open our mouths to speak. And then to speak from hearts full of compassion. + + +