

Listening to God?

A sermon preached at Summertown United Reformed Church on Sunday, 7th February 2010, by the Rev'd Pauline Main, based on the **Bible readings:** Isaiah 6: 1 – 8; Luke 5: 1 -11

Remember that we are in the Vision4Life prayer year, and I said that on communion Sundays I would try to focus our thinking, in the sermon at any rate, on prayer.

Last time – we looked at some aspects of the Lord's Prayer. Today – we think about listening to God.

Generally in prayer, **we talk to God.**

In our worship – the leader speaks words of prayer to God, on behalf of all. When we meet in small groups, when we pray by ourselves, mostly we speak - words of praise, of thanksgiving, words of confession; very often we speak to lift up to God our concerns for our world, our community, our friends.

We have short periods of silence, but mostly words.

Bishop John Pritchard in his useful book *How to Pray*, which I've mentioned before comments –

*“Prayer is sometimes spoken of as talking **with** God. But if that's the case, how come we hear so little from God's side? Perhaps we [are confident] that we can say things to God ... but the other end of the line seems pretty quiet. And in any case, if people say they hear the voice of God, we tend ... to wonder about their medical history.” (p11)*

I suspect that may well echo where many of us are. Talking to God – OK, listening, discerning God's voice is much more difficult.

So - how do we hear God speaking to us? And what is “listening” in the context of prayer and faith.

Bishop John defines it as being “open and attentive to God” and says that God communicates with us through “the whole fabric of life” if we make space to be aware of him.

In the Bible study group the last time we met, we started to speak about ways we had experienced God –

Bible

Through the bible – moments when a passage speaks just to us, to our situation

Other people

Care shown to us/our families, particularly at times of difficulty, the faith of others – all can give us glimpses of the love and care of God.

Natural world

The splendour of the natural world – especially when it catches us unawares, and there is a breathtaking moment.

Music

Music - the St Matthew Passion. Exquisite music which stirs the soul. For me, some Gospel music from Soweto, most of it not in English. I don't understand the words being sung, but the exuberance, along with the memories I have of the strong faith of African Christians I have known, can combine to give me a glimpse of God ...even when I'm doing the washing up!

I want to add -

Place

During the week I was in the Nuffield hospital, visiting a church member, and I popped into the chapel (multi-faith room they call it these days!). It's a lovely space – circular, very high. There is a wonderful quality of silence. In this busy hospital, suddenly this peace, the feel of God's presence.

I'm not suggesting we all camp out in the hospital's multi-faith room, but perhaps you have places where you have the same sense of God. And we do need to allow space to allow for such moments, "moments of transcendence" as one writer puts it.

Bishop John again talks about allowing ourselves time to slow down – and to look for "slowing down" times in our day, times when we allow space for God.

Hearing God's voice

In the Bible readings, we hear about people who in different ways hear God speaking to them.

Isaiah is in the Temple, where he has gone perhaps to pray and reflect. He has a vision or dream, call it what you will – a vision of the glory of God. Our own "glimpses of transcendence" through music, or the natural world, or my moment of quiet in the hospital chapel may not be so dramatic as Isaiah's but perhaps there is an echo of that same kind of experience.

Simon Peter and the others – they are going about their everyday business. And they hear God's voice speaking to them through a **person**. Jesus. Yes, Jesus was special, but he was still a human being who they engaged with, and I suggest there is a parallel in our own hearing God "speaking" through other people.

An example -

When I was thinking about ministry, I went to an "enquirers" conference. There, you find a bit more about what is involved, and it helps you make your mind up! I wanted to take things further, but David and I were recently married, and that was perhaps not the time. So I did nothing, until some while later, I was at a service where someone about to be ordained as a URC minister was talking about her call and all the excuses she had made not to take things further. In that, there was God speaking to me!

We need to "make space" in our lives to allow the transcendent moments, but also to we need to listen for God in the everyday of life, and through those we meet.

Our response

How do the people in our the readings respond to God speaking to them?

Firstly there is awe and wonder, a sense of the power, the majesty of God –

For Isaiah, at a turning point in the life of the nation, when the long and prosperous reign of king Uzziah is over, and invasion by Assyria is a real possibility. It is then that Isaiah experiences God's presence filling the Temple, worshipped by the heavenly beings.

Simon Peter's experience begins in a more down to earth way. As Peter is doing his everyday work, Jesus makes use of his boat. Then comes the special moment – a superabundance of fish, an amazing catch. "What's going on here?" thinks Peter.

The first response of both Isaiah and Peter is a sense of **unworthiness**.

Isaiah -

And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (Is 6:5)

Peter –

But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" (Luke 5:8)

Then come words of **forgiveness** (for Isaiah), "...*your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out*" (Is 6:7)

reassurance (for Peter) "*Do not be afraid*" (Luke 5:10)

Only then, **a call** to each to respond -

Isaiah - *Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" (Is 6:8)*

Peter and his friends - "*Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.*" (5:10)

God understands what we need to hear, and - when we are ready to hear - like myself and that other minister responding (at last) to God's call to leave behind our excuses.

And the call is not always to action/activity as it was for Isaiah and for Peter – but may be drawing us into a deeper fellowship with God and with each other

Each of us

When we looked at the Lord's Prayer, in January, we mentioned that we pray that prayer in solidarity with others – those around us, those around the world, those who have gone before us. “our Father” ...

Being part of a **community of prayer** is very important – we uphold each other in prayer, we have a “common life” of prayer for our church, for the world.

But our prayers have to be real and meaningful **for each one of us**.

“One of the paradoxes of faith is that it is both handed down as a living tradition and must also be known and felt as a new experience.” says one writer.

What is true for faith as a whole is certainly true for prayer

Each of us needs to find our own space, our own way – yes, of speaking to God, but also of listening to him.

There is no “right way” – what works for me may not work for you. We need to try different ways “into prayer” – silence as well as words, music, scripture, art, story - using our imagination to get “inside” a bible story.

May God help us during this “prayer year” and beyond to find the ways that work for each of us, that we may each grow as Christian people, and we may grow as a fellowship together.