

Today we are thinking about the theme ‘Letting Go of other voices to hear the voice of God.’

If there is one thing that you remember from my sermon- please let it be this

-Kneel down and shut up! (quote from Henri Nouwen)

Hearing the voice of God means giving time to let God speak.

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In the beginning God creates the universe from spoken word and breathe. Ruach – the wind, the breathe, the spirit- an unusual Hebrew word, as it is used in masculine and feminine forms. (More often feminine than masculine in Old Testament In the New Testament the spirit/ breathe Pneuma is neuter, John’s gospel the advocate is masculine, and in the early church, in the Syriach language, the spirit is feminine.)

As creatures of God we are dependent on God’s word and breathe. Because God loves people God has always spoken to them and still does/ is.

We just have to think of the story of the early church at Pentecost, with the rushing breathe of wind, and words of different languages spoken to know that God has spoken through history and still speaks as the Word and Breath.

And so I wonder if you see the word of God and the Bible as alive as breath? Close to you, and life giving for you? I wonder if you have ever felt the breathe of God guiding you or drawing you to a particular word or theme in a passage of scripture?

Our faith tells us that God speaks, God is a God of close connection and conversation with all his/her creatures.

How does God speak? In all manner of ways- a burning bush, a word, angelic visitations, prophetic dreams, visions and trances, in stillness and silence after the storm.

God called Samuel in the night and he learnt to communicate back ‘here I am’.

The Spirit called Jesus into the desert and he went.

In our gospel reading today Jesus is drawn into the desert by the Holy Spirit. And at the end of 40 days he hears the devil. He renounces the devil with his knowledge of scripture and wisdom about himself.

Underlying the dialogue between the devil and Jesus are two competing storylines. The devil offers a storyline of self-indulgence (make yourself bread from stones), self-aggrandizement (all the nations of the world will belong to you if you worship me), and self-serving religious identity (if you are the son of God cast yourself from the top of the temple).

Meanwhile, Jesus responds with quotations drawn from the Old Testament that show awareness that God is the true source of life and identity (he knows that life is more than food), even Jesus is reliant on God (the one worthy of true worship and service), and Jesus understands God’s character (God is not one to be tested).

Jesus’ responses are rooted in an underlying narrative that he is dependent on God rather than self for life, glory, and identity. His identity is rooted in God.

And so if we are thinking about listening to God and hearing God’s voice both as individuals and a community of believers, above all else, we need to begin with identity.

Is what we think we are hearing God say to us able to draw us deeper into the love of God and of others?

Is what we think we are hearing God say in line with what the Bible tells us the character of God and Jesus are like?

Does what we think God is saying come from honesty, true knowledge of what our own weaknesses and temptations are so

that we can see if it's for our own aggrandisement or God's glory?

If we hear God, we are drawn deeper into God, service of others and love. If it is not God we will be drawn into selfishness and our own ego.

Which is why it is so important to listen to God, not just on our own but with others, so that we can learn together despite our own individual egos. And which is why it is so important to have someone we trust to speak about spiritual matters with, to challenge our own self centredness and see deeper than perhaps we are able to on our own, this is why some people choose to have soul companions or spiritual directors.

Another, tricky thing is that we know from scripture, even last week's image of the transfiguration is that God is both revealed and concealed. But our hope is that in the whole of the story of the Bible will enable us to understand.

Time and time again in the Old Testament the Holy Spirit falls on prophets that speak God's word to the people. The message that they gave from God comforted the people- e.g. Comfort ye my people from Handel's Messiah.

The prophets words from God also challenged the people about how they related to each other, how they used their money, how they related to the poor.

Paula Gooder, speaks of the words of the prophets as *Comfort and Hope- the comfort of the afflicted and the afflicter of the comfortable.*

She sites the Bayeux tapestry – in which Bishop Odo brother of William the conquer, is said to be comforting his troops, with a large mace swung around above his head. Comfort means bringing hope but almost sometimes a sharp kick to get us to do things.

If what we think about what God is saying to us and it challenges our comfortable richness then it is GOD speaking. If we think about what God is saying to us and we are comforted in life's desolations then it is GOD speaking.

Our hope too is in the fact that Jesus and his disciples were able to discern the voice of Jesus but they may not have understood it was God right away-and they understood it in different ways- through trial and error they listened to Jesus teaching, but didn't always hear.

This is why I like the celtic notion of John, Jesus beloved disciple. In the early Irish Church, the Celtic people drew great inspiration from the Apostle John, the beloved disciple. They particularly remembered him as the one who leaned against Jesus' breast at the Last Supper. He became an image of the practise of listening for the heartbeat of God in the whole of life's experiences by quiet, silent, contemplative prayer.

Hearing God is not our thinking about God, our speaking with god, our talking about God.

It is about God's gift to us.

We need to learn to pray with and from the heart. To pray with the mind in the heart. (Nouwen)

The early Roman Church drew great inspiration from the Apostle Peter, the undoubted leader of the first disciples. They particularly remembered him as the one to whom Jesus gave 'the keys of the kingdom' and who powerfully preached the Word of God to those who would hear. He became an example of the practise of listening for God in the ordained teaching of the Word and in the life of the Church.

Over the centuries these two aspects of listening to God – the reflective, contemplative inner journey of the heart and the

analytical, rational hearing of the Word became separated with the result being a cause for division. But we need both.

We are created for relationship with God - not to follow the rules of a religion. God is always asking his disciples and listening to his disciples in relationship. I have called you friends Jesus says.

So in summary

- a. God's breath brings us life and words of life**
- b. We know it is God if the words we hear draw us from selfishness into love and into service**
- c. We know that sometimes God is silent and difficult to hear but that the overall themes of the bible show us that God wants to speak to us in loving relationship to comfort and challenge us**
- d. We know that we can contemplate God in our hearts by kneeling down and shutting up**
- e. We know that we can study God's word together to hear God through careful consideration, knowledge and reflection**
- f. Finally, we know that the discipline of listening to God takes time. It took Jesus 40 days to wrestle with God's word and then he was tempted, it took the disciples spending time at Jesus feet and they still misunderstood!**

A prayer

O let me hear thee speaking in accents clear and still

Above the storms of passion and murmurs of self will

Oh speak to reassure me, to hasten and control

Oh speak and make me listen

Thou guardian of my soul.