



Journey into Hearing

Week 6: 5 April 2009

Theme of the Week

Palm Sunday: Learning to hear and pay attention to God's Word prepares us to follow God



STARTING OUT

you who have ears to hear!

The Sunday before Easter in the Christian calendar traditionally recalls Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, riding a donkey and being greeted by a storm of noise. The crowds who greeted Jesus with palm leaves were shouting and singing in the street.

We are surrounded by all kinds of sounds and if we tried to hear everything at once – the TV, people talking, the phone ringing, the cat meowing, the door slamming in the wind, the baby crying – we would become disoriented and unable to do anything. So we filter what we hear, deciding from moment to moment where to focus our attention. A person who is concentrating really hard on a task may not hear what is said to her; you know if a person is listening really carefully to you or is being distracted by something or someone else. The ability to listen and to focus our attention is an opportunity and a problem. Listening is integral to sharing our faith, discerning what God wants, and in caring, helping and healing. It is fundamental to pastoral care of any kind. But we can also focus our listening attention in the wrong places or in the wrong way, missing things which are not said, or failing to notice other important voices.

**Inside, hollowness; what is
comes to me as a blow, but not
a wound**

Archbishop Rowan Williams

Christian worship is also full of sound, music, speech, reading, praying, praising. Although different kinds of worship have their own distinctive music and sounds, worship does still have its own particular rhythms and cadences which identify it as worship. We say the Lord's Prayer or psalms together in a way that it is different from just reading the words aloud. Silence too, as absence of sound (which we still 'hear') is also important in

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Christian worship. Jesus would have been very aware of the praise to God which attended his arrival, as opposed to excited conversations and cries of welcome. He would have been even more aware of the difference between loving praise to God which he heard on his entry into Jerusalem and the shouts of 'crucify him!' which he heard on Good Friday.

So it is worth meditating on the sounds and music of Holy Week and what they have to tell us about the spiritual journey through hearing and listening.

Activity

Pause for five minutes and write down all the sounds you can hear. Do you know what all the sounds are and where they are all coming from? Can you hear your blood pumping and your breathing? Are there more sounds to listen to than you expected? What sort of sounds would you normally not pay any attention to?

Say (or sing) the Lord's Prayer or a favourite hymn. Listen to the sounds carefully. What makes doing this into prayer or praise?

GOING DEEPER

Thinking about being deaf

In the crime drama TV series *Messiah* (1,2,and 3), in which the crimes are related to religious themes, Ken Stott plays Red Metcalfe, a Detective Chief Inspector whose task is to find out what the religious themes mean and how they relate to the crimes. In the series, Red's wife is deaf and so Red and Susan communicate by sign language and lip reading. The series, which is full of noise and extreme violence, is counterpointed by scenes between Red and Susan which require careful mutual attention as they read each other's faces and hands. Their dialogue is subtitled for the viewer.

Susan is indispensable to Red, not just as a support, but also ironically as a 'sounding board'. Sign language allows her to frame questions and give support in a three dimensional and often uniquely creative way, which helps Red think things through. Susan is also a person who can keep confidences safe; she is a perfect confessor. In Susan's silence, Red finds a place to lay his confusion and doubt. When their relationship is tested and Red admits to turning to another woman, Susan does not ask whether Red found her more attractive but asks instead "what did her voice sound like?"





The world of the deaf can therefore be a rich source of communication and deaf worship is a thriving and dramatic way of relating to the gospel. Silence too, is a rich source of spiritual growth. Talking to someone who will keep confidences, such as a Christian minister, doctor, lawyer or counsellor can be a tremendous source of relief for people.



Jesus also alerts us to spiritual deafness which disables people much more than physical deafness. Just as physical deafness means people have to pay close attention in order to communicate, so people can 'switch off' and fail to hear what God is saying to us through scripture and Christian faith. We can fill our heads with other kinds of spiritual noise or convince ourselves that what we want to hear must be the right way to go. Jesus tells us that we are fooling ourselves when we fall into spiritual deafness and stop paying attention to our relationship with God.

Activity

Put some headphones on and play something through them until you can hear as little external noise as possible and then ask someone to talk to you. What do you have to do to make out what they are saying? Try and carry on a conversation using whatever signs you find necessary. How much more effort do you have to put in to the process of communication?

Do you think you put enough effort into prayer and worship? What are the signs of spiritual deafness?

The film *Babel* explores notions of communication, misunderstanding, language barriers and deafness. You can find a synopsis of the film and questions to think about at www.spiritualjourneys.org.uk/pdf/Babel.pdf

MOVING ON

Seeing scripture differently

Luke 19:28-44 (Jesus enters Jerusalem)

After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, "Why are you untying it?" just say this: "The Lord needs it."' So those





who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" They said, "The Lord needs it." Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying,

"Blessed is the king

who comes in the name of the Lord!

Peace in heaven,

and glory in the highest heaven!"

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God."

A story

Karla gets out of bed and walks down the street to her friend's house. She brings some bread rolls, some dried figs and an old bottle full of water. She is careful to blend in when she walks down the street and not look as if she is doing anything out of the ordinary. At the corner near her friend's house, she stops and checks if anyone is arriving. If there is someone at the door, she will walk around the houses again. It is clear. The friend opens the door and Karla quickly goes inside. They go to a room at the back of the house. They are meeting for worship, about four people in all, who are willing to risk it. They have no Bible, it was taken from them some time ago and Karla's friend was in trouble for possessing it, even though freedom to worship is supposedly permitted by their country. Instead, they remember together favourite stories from scripture and pray together in whispers. They light a candle, break the bread and drink the water together, and share the figs. Another person keeps a watch. They will be in a great deal of trouble if the police come in. There is a church in the village, but it is used for other purposes, they cannot visit it. But they will always risk coming together for worship, even if they must gather in silence. For them, it is worth it.

The story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is very familiar to Christians. Try looking at this passage as a struggle to pray and worship freely in a place where the authorities want to suppress it for reasons of their own. Many Christians in the world, like Karla, experience this daily. What might it feel like to have to keep your faith quiet, not to be able to worship freely, not be able to speak about or share your faith with others?





Jesus says 'if these were silent, the stones would shout out'. What does he mean? What point is he making about what happens when worship is suppressed and its people persecuted?

Think about the place of silence in your usual worship setting. When is silence rather than sounds or songs important in worship?

You could also find out about the Quaker tradition of worship and the role of silence in the Quaker meeting.

J Brent Bill, *Holy Silence: A Gift of Quaker Spirituality*, Paraclete Press, 2005
http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/subdivisions/quakers_3.shtml

MOVING INTO LENT

The Word of God in the desert



A headspring in the Judean Desert

Photo: Ester Inbar

The temptation narratives of Matthew and Luke in the New Testament both offer Jesus' experiences as a form of dialogue. Jesus sees alternative life paths in visual form, but even more insidious is the voice of temptation creeping into his mind and testing his will. Yet Jesus is also responding to the call of his Father, the Word of God.

In this sense, Jesus' temptation experience is close to the primal experience in the Garden of Eden. The Word of God to Adam and Eve is not to touch the forbidden tree. The word of the serpent is reasonable and logical, making suggestions, offering alternative viewpoints that will let them be separate from God, finding the weak points in their resolve, testing their obedience





and memory of God's Word to them. Adam and Eve of course, failed. Jesus, steeped in Genesis, undergoes his own trial of temptation.

The gospels make it sound as if it was easy for Jesus to put aside the temptations and assert his own voice as stronger than that of the devil's same reasoned arguments of "prove it!", "why not put God to the test", "use your own power!" But it would not have been a temptation if Jesus had not had to really struggle with his resolve. He succeeds where Adam and Eve failed, putting aside the temptation to put his own desires before God's will. He will live on God's Word and trust his life to it, rather than rely on purely human devices and desires. This lesson too, finds its way into the Lord's Prayer he gives us, 'your will be done on earth as it is in heaven'.

Some questions to think about

- There are a number of secular voices around today saying we should only trust our human instincts and ideas? How would you respond?
- What sort of modern temptations can distract us from hearing and responding to God's Word?

RESTING ON THE WAY

Prayer and reflection

Psalm 67: a song

May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face to shine upon us, Selah
that your way may be made known upon the earth,
your saving power among the nations.
Let the peoples praise you O God;
let all the peoples praise you.

Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,
for you guide the peoples with equity
and guide the nations upon the earth. Selah
let the people praise you O God; let all the people praise you.

The earth has yielded its increase;
God, our God has blessed us.
May God continue to bless us;
let all the ends of the earth revere him.





*The company of angels
are praising thee on high
and mortal men and all things
created make reply*

*The people of the Hebrews
with palms before thee went
our praise and prayer and anthems
before thee we present*

*All glory, laud, and honour
to thee Redeemer King
to whom the lips of children
made sweet hosannas ring*



9th Century hymn translated by J M Neale

Where else can this journey take me?

There is more material to explore in *Sense Making Faith* in the 'Journey into Hearing' chapter and you can explore further journeys and ideas in the Explore section of www.spiritualjourneys.org.uk in the section called 'Hear'.

Other resources:

J Brent Bill, *Holy Silence: A Gift of Quaker Spirituality*, Paraclete Press, 2005

http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/subdivisions/quakers_3.shtml

The Daily Service on Radio 4 from April 6th to April 9th offers more readings and reflections for you to listen to about people whose spiritual journeys were changed by what they heard, as we continue the journey on and into the celebration of Easter.

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