

Extract from sabbatical project: How to help people hear God; *how to listen to God for ourselves*  
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## INTRODUCTION

As I was preparing for my sabbatical, knowing I needed to produce something, I thought I would keep a journal and perhaps produce a small document from it, perhaps of around 1,000 words. However, once I started to read, think and pray, I realised that this is a huge question with complicated strands on the one hand, whilst at the same time being fairly simple.

In light of this, so as not to bore you, I have written this extract, for those who haven't time or inclination to read through it in its entirety. No matter, it has been worth doing for my personal refreshment, I want to say spiritual refreshment but that would be a mistake because our spirituality affects our emotional and physical being as well as our soul.

## FIRST THOUGHTS

Listening to God is not an exact science. To hear God, I believe, we need a grounding in scripture, for the bible is our prime source and a foundation to knowing God, and how he wants us to live. Reading or listening to his word in scripture is often the source of enlightenment and guidance, as St Paul says in his letter to the Hebrews, *<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.*<sup>i</sup>

I know of at least two people who have, on occasions, heard the audible voice of God, but for most of us, it is the still small voice, a whisper into our mind, echoed in our heart and confirmed in our 'knower', which is, I believe, situated in the core of our being, where the Holy Spirit resides.

It was in the preface of Dallas Willard's book, *Hearing God*, that I was first struck by an often-overlooked truth: **'hearing God make sense only in the framework of living in the will of God.'**<sup>ii</sup> This is so true. So often Christians have thought they have, or indeed fooled themselves into thinking God said it was ok to leave their husband or wife and run off with the organist! Or other such actions that when held up against the whole tenor of scripture, is nonsense. I believe the bigger decision we need to make or action that will have a big impact, the louder God speaks, and of course, we need to ask for discernment and confirmation.

I also believe, like Dallas Willard, that when we have a personal relationship with God, we hear him speak as a matter of course. Not necessarily profound words of wisdom, nor direction and guidance – although he does of course on occasion, but God is always speaking through nature, through his word in scripture, through others and into our hearts with an assurance of his love.

When God speaks we feel his peace and joy, unlike when we listen to the voice of the world or indeed Satan, then instead of peace and joy, we can feel guilt or shame. God does let us know when we have sinned, but this comes with a sense of repentance, not shame. Jesus took all our shame to the cross with him, therefore, if we hear God, it is not accompanied by shame. Our enemy on the other hand is rather good at causing us to feel guilt and shame whether it be deserved or undeserved.

## SCRIPTURE

The bible is our primary source for learning about God, his ways, his amazing love for us, how he wants us to live and how we can be reconciled with him. Paul says to Timothy, 2 Timothy 3; *<sup>16</sup> All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup> so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.* When we have a good knowledge of scripture we have a good idea of what God thinks about many things, it is a guidebook for our life, a comfort in times of sorrow, full of hope, and, challenges us to live better.

Scripture can speak to us as we read or listen to it, sometimes a word or a phrase just jumps out at us or stays in our minds. There are other ways of using scripture to speak to us, I detail a few below.

## DWELLING IN THE WORD

The same passage of scripture is used for a long period, say a year, before moving onto another. This is not a bible study, and the conversation after is not about context, instead it is attentive listening to the words, allowing the Holy Spirit to peak your interest and then listening to a partner into free speech.<sup>iii</sup>

## LECTIO DIVINA

**"Lectio Divina"**, a Latin term, meaning "divine reading," it describes a way of reading the Scriptures whereby we gradually let go of our own agenda and open ourselves to what God wants to say to us.

## THE IGNATIUS WAY; PRAYING SCRIPTURE WITH THE HELP OF THE IMAGINATION

It is good to use a gospel story, we enter into the story using our powers of imagination. Read through the story a few times then enter into it as if you are actually there now.

The practice of the above will, if we allow it, transform us from the inside out. (For a fuller explanation of these ways of using scripture please see the full project.)

## NATURE, PEOPLE

God, I believe, speaks to us through his creation; a beautiful sunset or sunrise, the intricate details of a cobweb glistening with dew, the impossible aerodynamics of bees, the beauty of landscape, animal, flowers and fauna – surely all indications of a creator. Nature also has healing properties, even the medical profession talks about healing for mental health issues through being with, and perhaps working with nature.

There is something here about pausing and taking time to rest in God, and I believe, along with many other Christians who seek God, we need to take time to be still and silent, lifting our hearts and minds to God and just bask in his presence. We may not 'hear' a word from God but we will be filled with his peace and love, and, all relationships need time spent together.

Another way God speaks to us is through others, whether they know it or not.

Daily prayers from the Corrymeela Community<sup>iv</sup>, remind us of this: From Midday prayer;

*We break from the doings of our day and make space to notice you. You are always with us in surprising guises.*

*Jesus of the flesh, we meet you in worker and friend, stranger and pilgrim, the needy and the needed, the questioner and questioned.....*

GUIDELINES AND MISGUIDANCE TO HEARING GOD, (taken Dallas Willard's book)

G1 We must make it our primary goal not just to hear the voice of God but to be mature people in a living relationship with him. Only in this way will we hear him rightly. (this is expanded on in the full project.)

## IN SUMMARY

God speaks to all of us if we would but listen, as Elizabeth Browning says, 'each bush is afire with God' we just need to look.' To hear God, we need to have a grounding in scripture, we need to continually seek to deepen our faith and understanding, and to practice walking in faith, in love, sharing God's compassion and passion for others – in other words; live the life. We also need to **believe** that God speaks to us.

We should be actively working for the kingdom in whatever way God calls us too, we need to spend time with God – just enjoying his presence, and, most importantly, we need often, to ask the Holy Spirit to open our eyes and ears to God, to remove the scales from our eyes, sin from our souls, so we can stand in God's presence and know our place in him.

God loves all of his creation so often when God speaks it is not just to make us feel cozy but to spur us on to help others, to help point the way back to him.

## THINGS TO TAKE BACK INTO MINISTRY FROM SABBATICAL

I realise that in some ways that I, along with other priests, have been somewhat lax in our teaching for various reasons. I want to address this by running some quiet days with teaching on how to listen to God and connecting this with living a mature relationship with God, and also bring it to a small group I am working with. This will of course, also spill over into my preaching.

I believe the sabbatical has been invaluable for me personally; time, space, going back to basics, strengthening my own relationship with God. I believe my ministry will change slightly, have perhaps a slightly different emphasis; whilst continuing to spend more time listening to God, I want to also take more time to listen to others for two reasons; 1] we hear God in one another 2] everyone needs to be heard, this will help people feel valued.

I believe this time away has given me the space to prepare for the next 9 or so years of ministry, I pray that they will be years of seeing much fruit.

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<sup>i</sup> Hebrews 12:4

<sup>ii</sup> Dallas Willard, Hearing God page 11

<sup>iii</sup> See Appendix 1 for full details

<sup>iv</sup> Daily Prayers with the Corrymeela Community Canterbury Press