

Session 5: LISTENING

1. As we come to our last session of this course, I want to thank all of you who have been coming all through Lent. I'm especially grateful because I've been teaching this little course mostly out of my personal experience in prayer, rather than out of studying the writings of the experts.
2. I know a little about what experts on prayer have taught. I have lots of books by holy men and women of antiquity and of our own time. They have helped me.
3. But I'm not an "expert." I'm not a mystic. I'm not a monk or hermit. I'm not a "holy man." To use a simple analogy, I'm your average "house-husband" in the kitchen. I can cook. – Joan can cook better, of course, but I know how to cook some things. –There are a few dishes I can do well. (I think I make pretty good omelets, for example.) But I'd never try to pass myself off as a chef. I can make decent meals. I can even cook some things that are suitable for entertaining. But nobody is ever going to want to pay for my recipes. I'll never have my own cooking show on TV!

By the same token, I'm an ordinary parish priest who prays – just an ordinary *person* who prays – like you. I deal with similar life issues and similar stresses. And, so, I believe that what I've learned in a lifetime of praying might in some way connect with *your* experiences and *your* concerns and encourage *you* in seeking a deeper relationship with God through prayer.
4. Because preachers always depend on their own experiences and often use them as illustrations in sermons or classes, people in my churches over the years have said: *"It's so wonderful that you've heard God speak to you. I wish I could hear God. But God has never spoken to me. What am I doing wrong?"*
5. Of course, I'm not able to tell anybody, *"I know what you're doing wrong."* How could I know? So I tell them what I do know: *"God is speaking. God is always trying to communicate with us, always trying to get our attention. We all need to make sure we know how to listen."*
6. This morning I want to offer a few pointers, out of my limited experience, on how we can hear God "speaking" to us. But I want to broaden the concept of *speaking*. What I really intend is to talk about how we can perceive not only the "words," but also the truth, the wisdom, the grace, and the experience of his love that God is communicating to us all the time. What God wants to communicate to you and me is sometimes *non-verbal*. We need to expect that, and be prepared to recognize when it's happening.
7. I want to start by saying that God *speaks with many voices*; or, better, God *"communicates" in many ways*. Therefore, it's important not to limit your way of listening, your way of "tuning in" to God, your way of "trying to get on God's wavelength." If you imagine that the only way God ever speaks is through events like Moses at the Burning Bush, or the Virgin Mary hearing God's message to her from the angel Gabriel, or through a Voice from the sky like Peter, James, and John had on the Mount of the Transfiguration, then you are going to miss most of the ways God is trying to communicate with you.
8. Here's a question to ponder: *Isn't God's Message, God's Truth, more important than the language or form of words or other medium—verbal or non-verbal – through which that message is communicated?*

If Christians did not believe that's the case, then we wouldn't encourage new translations of the Bible. We would assume that only the Hebrew or Greek originals have merit. But we're always producing new translations and new paraphrases, trying hard to get at and understand "the Message" of Scripture.

Thus, "the Word of God" is bigger than "the language used." That is to say, the same Truth of God can be successfully conveyed in a variety of languages and dialects, ancient and modern: Aramaic, Greek, Latin, English, Spanish, *etc.*, and even through pictures, not using words at all. God's truth can be communicated through sign language! That's why, in the New Testament, there is so much discussion about "signs," particularly in John. That's why we have the Sacraments. Sacraments communicate God's Truth on a non-verbal, but spiritually powerful, symbolic level.

9. Therefore, we have to conclude that the PRAYER OF LISTENING requires more than our willingness to ponder different forms of *speech*. It requires that we be continually prayerful and intentionally oriented towards God, so that we're ready to perceive what God might want to communicate, even though what God might want to communicate is non-verbal.

To "hear God" demands that we learn how – as some people put it – to "center ourselves." Or, as I like to put it, learn how to "turn our face to God." Jeremiah 29:12-13 says, "*When you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart.*" Or, as Mendelssohn quoted it in his oratorio "Elijah," "*If with all your hearts ye truly seek me, ye shall surely ever find me. Thus, saith our God.*" Jesus says, in Luke 11, in response to his disciples asking him to teach them about prayer: "*So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.*"

God's "word" for which we are seeking is just as likely, in my experience, to come to us through something we *see* or even, sometimes, through something we *feel* as it is to come through something we *hear*.

10. How does this sound to you so far? Are you with me? Does this make sense? Does it jibe with your own experience?
11. I am going to talk about the ways I perceive God "speaking to me," or "communicating with me". I'm not going to talk about these in any rank order or priority. In my experience, any one way God communicates with me *feels* just as authentic and meaningful as any other way.
12. I will begin with Scripture. I have heard God addressing me often through the Bible. How I hear God speaking to me, privately and personally, through the Bible has to be distinguished from how the Church, through the ages, has heard God addressing his People and has interpreted the meaning of that message.
13. I do believe that the authority of that corporate, historic interpretation of what God is saying to the Church ranks above any *private* spiritual discernment of my own about something else God might be saying to me, *privately*, through a particular passage in the Bible.

And what God wants to communicate, narrowly, just to me through Biblical text may not be a message also for you. It could be, but God would have to show you, personally, that it was. However, what the Bible is saying to the Body of Christ is equally for all of us.

14. One of the ways I hear God speak to me is through *meditation* on Scripture. Sometimes the “Message” for me comes suddenly, like a bolt of lightning, and I say: “Wow! God is really talking to me here!” And I can interpret and apply the passage in a personal context.

At other times, the personal significance comes slowly to my understanding, perhaps after I have meditated many times on a particular passage.

15. Has this happened to you as you have “listened to God” in Scripture? Would you like to talk about it?

16. Another way I often hear the Lord speaking to me, as I have already told you, is through journaling. As said in the session on journaling, I “write letters to God” and sometimes “God writes back.”

This demands that I use “faith imagination.” I write down what I *believe* God wants to say to me in a given context, knowing full well that I might get it wrong.

But because I go back and read these “messages from God” again, weeks later, or months later, or even years later, I can discern – through experience and after waiting – whether what I wrote down was precisely God’s word to me, or maybe 75% God and 25% me, or maybe just 25% God and 75% me, or maybe it was 100% my own wishful thinking.

17. Sometimes I hear the Lord speaking clearly through what other people say to me or through what I read, or even hear in the words of a song or hymn. And this category also includes wise things that might be said by people who were not preaching or teaching or even trying to “be wise,” and especially not trying to “speak for God”.

Sometimes other people may describe to me how they perceived a truth from God through their own experiences and the Holy Spirit will say, in my heart, in effect: “Listen, don’t miss this! This is true for you, too.”

Only twice have I ever had someone tell me directly “This is what God is saying to you: . . .” and discerned that the “message” in question was indeed from God. Just twice. More often when that has happened, the message was actually what the other person wanted God to say to me. Sometimes it was more what the speaker wanted to hear for himself.

18. Has anyone ever told you, “I have a message for you from God”? How did you respond?

19. Another way God speaks is through what we observe in the natural world. I think there are lots of people who “hear God” through the natural order. This is something that God intends to do, and the Bible tells us so. As it says in the familiar first verses of Psalm 19:

*The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the firmament shows his handiwork.
One day tells its tale to another,
and one night imparts knowledge to another.
Although they have no words or language,
and their voices are not heard,
Their sound has gone out into all lands,
and their message to the ends of the world.*

20. I have sometimes gone on “prayer walks” out in the woods, or even in towns, and asked God to speak to me through what I might see, and He has often shown me something special. He has drawn my attention to a thing or a phenomenon of nature, and as I have looked at it, he has given me a sense of its meaning or significance within the context of my life. This does not happen on every walk, but it has happened often enough for me to trust that it *can* happen any time. So I am ready for it when it comes.
21. Is there anybody who has perceived a word of truth, a message from God, through an experience in nature?
22. The last category of situations in which we can sometimes perceive a message coming to us from God is the category of dreams.

We know about Joseph the Dreamer in the Book of Genesis, and we know about Joseph the Carpenter, the foster father of Jesus, in Matthew, who also has important dreams.

I would say that sometimes, rarely, I have “heard” God through dreams. Or, rather, God has *shown me something*, revealed himself to me in some way, through a dream. Probably the most powerful experience of God’s grace and love I have ever had in my life came to me through a dream during Advent back in 2007. I wrote about it in the Christ Church *Chronicle* not long after it happened.

23. Has anybody heard God speak in a dream? Or had God reveal something of himself, his Truth, his love, in for you a dream?
24. Learn to cultivate your capacity to perceive what God is trying to “get through to you.” We may rightly call this the “prayer of listening” – but never forget that you listen with your heart as well as with your ears, and you “listen” with your other sensory faculties, too.

Turn your heart to God. Turn your face to God. Pray without ceasing. If you seek Him, you shall surely find Him, if you seek Him with all your heart.