

Worship @ Home

Christchurch 31st January 2021

'Recognising God – scary encounter or familiar voice?'

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Call to worship

Happy and blessed are those who walk in wisdom.
Come let us seek the wisdom of God
in our reverence and worship today.
Amen

How great is our God (The Splendour of the King) StF 15

The splendour of the King,
clothed in majesty
Let all the Earth rejoice
All the Earth rejoice.
He wraps himself in light
And darkness tries to hide
And trembles at His voice
Trembles at His voice.

How great is our God, sing with me
How great is our God, and all will see
How great, how great is our God

Age to age He stands
And time is in His hands
Beginning and the end

Beginning and the end
The Godhead Three in One
Father Spirit Son
The Lion and the Lamb
The Lion and the Lamb

How great is our God, sing with me..

Name above all names
Worthy of our praise
My heart will sing
How great is our God

How great is our God, sing with me...

Chris Tomlin, Ed Cash and Jesse Reeves

Prayer

Today, Lord Jesus, I choose
To spend some time, proper time,
In your company.

I'm not going to rush ahead
To ideas and opinions about you.
No, I am going to watch and listen
As people did of old.

Today, Lord Jesus, I am going
To notice how you take in a scene,
Weigh up the motives of people who question you,
And then discern the real, deep motives
That lie within their words.

Today, Lord Jesus, because
Sometimes I struggle to distinguish
The voice of true authority
From the fake or deluded pronouncements
Of conmen and imposters,
I will listen for your words,
Watch the manner of your touch,
And come to know how true authority
Sounds and looks and feels.

Ian Fosten, URC prayer handbook 2021

Deuteronomy 18: 15-20

The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. This is what you requested of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: 'If I hear the voice of the LORD my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die.' Then the LORD replied to me: 'They are right in what they have said. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die.'

Prayer of confession

In the beginning, when God created a garden, and people to live in the garden, God walked with Adam under the trees in the cool of the day.

Talking with God, listening to God, was as easy as a stroll with a friend.

At Horeb, the slaves who had escaped from Egypt saw the God who had rescued them.

Just a single glimpse of the power that had destroyed Pharaoh and his armies was absolutely terrifying.

They asked Moses to promise to protect them.

To mediate between them.

They didn't want any more close encounters with that kind of God.

What sort of God do you encounter when you pray?

I invite you to spend a couple of minutes in silence.

Listen out for the sounds around you.

What can you hear?

What can you hear in the room where you are sitting?

What can you hear from outside your window?

Where might you hear the voice of God in the sounds of your world?

Silence...

When we don't make time to walk with you,

Lord have mercy.

When we get too scared of your presence,

Lord have mercy.

When we want others to stand between us because you are just too bright,

Lord have mercy.

When we fail to listen to the prophets you have given us,

Lord have mercy.

The Lord says to you and to me:

You are right in what you have said.

But I have not left you.

Just stay silent.

Just listen.

You will hear me.

For I am always speaking.

Amen.

Mark 1: 21-28

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.' But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!' And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.' At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Reflection

13 Billion dollars.

That's how much Jeff Bezos added to his net worth one day last July.

Because we had all been stuck at home for months.

And we couldn't go shopping.

So Amazon was making a mint.

That day set a record for the largest ever single-day increase in the wealth of an individual.

Ever.

And he wasn't the only one.

According to Oxfam, the combined wealth of the world's 10 richest men has increased by \$540 billion since March last year.

Half a trillion dollars.

Enough to vaccinate everyone in the world, and then some.

This week Oxfam published a report.

The Inequality Virus.

It claims that the Coronavirus pandemic has exaggerated the gap between rich and poor, black and white, men and women, healthy and unhealthy.

This is what Antonio Guterres, the UN Secretary General, says in the report:

'COVID-19 has been like an x-ray, revealing fractures in the fragile skeleton of the societies we have built.

It's a myth that we are all in the same boat.

While we are all floating on the same sea, it's clear that some are in super yachts, while others are clinging to the drifting debris.'

Oxfam publishes a report every year, timed to coincide with the Davos summit.

Davos is a ski resort in Switzerland.

But it has become shorthand for the World Economic Forum.

An annual opportunity for the world's wealthiest and most powerful men – and it mostly is men – to meet and make decisions about the future of the economy.

It should have been meeting this week, but it has been postponed to May because of COVID.

The qualification you need to be there?

Money.

Power.

Economic clout.

Oxfam's reports often get a lot of press coverage.

But they also get a lot of criticism.

They're accused of exaggerating and manipulating statistics to provoke outrage.

When they call for higher taxes for the wealthy, they're told they are obsessed with the rich.

That the way forward is trickle-down economics, not punitive tax regimes.

You can imagine who is leading the criticism of Oxfam.

So this brings us to one of the questions posed by today's lectionary readings.

Where does authority lie?

How do we know who to believe?

Whose voices do we hear?

And whose do we tune out?

If we're people of faith, how do we hear what God might be saying to us?

In our reading from Deuteronomy, we eavesdrop on the people of Israel wrestling with this familiar theme.

We kind of want to hear what God has to say to us.

But it's a bit scary.

Remember when we came face to face with God at Mount Horeb?

Terrifying.

We'd prefer someone human to mediate.

To do the frightening stuff of encountering God.

And then to tell us what he said.

We're assuming God's a he.

One of the powerful elite who manage the world, who attend annual economic forums, who dictate policy for us minions.

Our job is just to listen.

And to obey.

But of course this raises its own questions.

How do we know who to listen to?

Which prophets are sharing the word of God?

And which are simply manipulating the divine voice for personal gain?

Or to please an insecure ruler?

These chapters of Deuteronomy are full of guidelines for kings, priests, prophets.

Safeguarding rules for channelling God.

And, indeed, is this really what God is like?
A scary, judgemental bloke in the sky?
That we need to be protected from?

In our reading from Mark's gospel, we see Jesus in his first public appearance.
He's teaching in the synagogue.
Here he encounters a man with an unclean spirit.
How would we diagnose this man today?
Is he schizophrenic?
Epileptic?
Does he have some kind of personality disorder?
We don't know.
But what we do know is that he is different.
Odd.
Something about him marks him out as not one of the usual crowd.
And he is the one who recognises the truth of who Jesus is.
The Holy one of God.

It's interesting that in Mark's gospel, the first person to recognise who Jesus is, is this madman in the synagogue.
And the last person is the centurion overseeing the crucifixion.
Truly this man was God's son.
The gospel is bookended by two outsiders who can discern the truth about God in Christ.
Whereas the religious authorities see him as a subversive rule-breaker who needs to be silenced.
Or got rid of.

Whose voices do we listen to?
Whose voices mediate the truth about God?

The people in the synagogue recognise that Jesus has authority.
Not like the scribes.
So why?

I think it's about the congruence between his words and his life.
He doesn't just teach.
He acts.
He sees this man, struggling with something that distorts his life and his reason.
And he does something about it.
The evil spirit leaves him.

This impulse to help, to heal, to reach out will get Jesus into a lot of trouble.
Because sometimes, when he does it, he breaks the rules.
He does it on the wrong day. To the wrong person.
Without the right protocols.

But his actions are always inspired by love.
He knows God intimately.
He is not terrified by a fiery voice on top of a mountain.
His relationship with God is like a child with a parent.
He has God's DNA running through everything that he is and everything that he does.
I think people could sense his integrity.
His authority.

So what does that mean for us?

There are many answers to this.
And many sermons I could preach!
I'd quite like to preach a whole sermon on the Wesleyan Quadrilateral.
Or on prayer.
On the good life.
Or on how to read the Bible.
And I'm sure I will...

But this morning I want to focus on one thing.
On listening.
It's clear that Jesus made time to listen to his father.
Quiet times in rooms, or on boats, or up mountains.
And he made time to listen to people.
People who affirmed him.
And people who challenged him.
Even people who seemed a bit bonkers!

And his disciples listened to him.
They came to understand that when they heard him speak, they heard God speaking through his words and through his life.
When they no longer had Jesus with them in person, they listened to each other.
When the early church disagreed about how inclusive they should be, they called a council so they could hear each other's different perspectives.

And they listened out for God too.
Sometimes it was dreams and visions.
You'll remember how Peter had a dream about a sheet descending from the sky full of all kinds of different animals.
He took that to be a word from God.
Nothing is unclean.
Open your doors to the gentiles too.

This week, at the Circuit Leadership Team on Wednesday, we had a conversation about the future.
About what our churches are called to be and do as we emerge from lockdown.

As we listened to each other, a common theme emerged.

It was about sanctuary.

About creating a safe space where people could come to re-connect with each other.

To feel welcome.

To heal, slowly, from their long isolation.

This reminded me of the consultations we had here at Christchurch last June.

When we discerned a need for Open Church.

For the special kind of sanctuary that could offer.

And then on Friday I set time aside to read some papers that Alison had sent me a couple of weeks ago.

Prophecies, words from God which she believed God wanted me to hear on behalf of our church.

And one of them was this:

As we sheltered under the shadow of the Most High God in these times, sought him, have gone deeper with him

- and some of us have had our ministries pared back by him

- so he has been, & still is, creating in and through our ministries

the foundations for this new wave of healing and wholeness.

He calls us to be his 'cities of refuge' where all can come and find safety, rest and healing... ..through community and communion with others and with God.'

The thing is, if you make time to listen, you can expect to hear what God has to say.

And God will keep saying it, through different people, in different places, until we hear it.

But we need to really listen.

To each other.

To dreams and visions and prophetic words.

To the loud voices.

And the quiet voices.

And the voices outside the church.

And the voices that we ourselves have silenced.

I don't think God is a terrifying fire.

I think God speaks through us, his creatures.

Just listen.

Amen.

Every Promise StF 156

From the breaking of the dawn
To the setting of the sun,
I will stand on every promise of Your word.
Words of power, strong to save,
That will never pass away,
I will stand on every promise of Your word.
For Your covenant is sure,
And on this I am secure,
I can stand on every promise of Your word.

When I stumble and I sin,
Condemnation pressing in,
I will stand on every promise of Your word.
You are faithful to forgive,
That in freedom I might live,
So I stand on every promise of Your word.
Guilt to innocence restored:
You remember sins no more!
So I'll stand on every promise of Your word.

When I'm faced with anguished choice,
I will listen for Your voice,
And I'll stand on every promise of Your word.
Through this dark and troubled land
You will guide me with your hand
As I stand on every promise of Your word.
And you've promised to complete
Every work begun in me,
So I'll stand on every promise of Your word.

Hope that lifts me from despair,
Love that casts out every fear,
As I stand on every promise of Your word.
Not forsaken, not alone,
For the Comforter has come,
And I stand on every promise of Your word.
Grace sufficient, grace for me,
Grace for all who will believe,
We will stand on every promise of Your word.

Keith Getty and Stuart Townend

Prayers for ourselves and others

We've been thinking this morning about listening out for God.
What are we doing when we pray for other people?
I think all too often we talk too much.
We present God with a list of names, a list of concerns, a list of miracles we need.
I wonder what would happen if instead of speaking, we listened?

So this morning I invite you to make yourself comfortable.
If you can, sit up straight, and feel the way your head balances on your spine...
Feel the solidity of the chair underneath you...
Feel the floor beneath your feet...
Notice the quiet rhythm of your breath...

And now, listen.

I invite you, first of all, to think about our Church Meeting on Thursday evening.
If you weren't able to be there, five members of the congregation shared with honesty and courage something of their lockdown life.
We were all moved.
We were all brought together as a community.

If you heard these stories, in the silence, please pray for Sheila, Pauline, Tracy, Angela and Lizzie.
If you didn't hear them, listen in your imagination to the very different stories of those around us.
Those who are living alone.
Those who are working on the front line.
Those who are coping with children of all ages.
Those known to you.
Those who are struggling behind closed doors.
And as you listen, hold them in the light of God's love.

Silence...

I invite you to think about key workers who go on taking risks so that society can continue.
Nurses, doctors, paramedics and carers.
Delivery drivers and postmen and women.
Supermarket staff.
Teachers.
What are they saying to you?
What are they saying to God?
Hold them in the light of God's love.

Silence...

Finally, I invite you to think about those who have lost loved ones.
Especially those who have died of COVID.
This week in particular we remember Pauline and Betty.
You will know others.
You will have read other stories in the newspapers.
Listen to the grief.
Sometimes there is nothing we can say in the face of loss.
Sometimes all we can do is just be there.
And we can hold each other in the light of God's love.

Silence...

Listening God,
You have promised to hear us,
Wherever we are,
Whatever we are going through.

Even when we cannot hear you,
Or even feel your presence,
You are there.

Be with us, and with those we love,

And with those we don't know, but who are loved by you.
Comfort and guide us.
Lead us on to whatever tomorrow may bring,
Knowing that we are with you. Amen.

Lord's prayer

Blessing

Go out into our world
Knowing you are not alone.
Listen out for your companions,
Listen out for God.
And travel with hope.
Amen.

Beautiful One (Tim Hughes)

Wonderful, so wonderful
Is Your unfailing love
Your cross has spoken mercy over me
No eye has seen, no ear has heard
No heart could fully know

How glorious, how beautiful you are!
Beautiful One I love
Beautiful One I adore

Beautiful One my soul must sing
Powerful, so powerful
Your glory fills the skies
Your mighty works displayed for all to see

The beauty of Your majesty
Awakes my heart to sing

How marvellous, how wonderful You are
Beautiful One I love
Beautiful One I adore
Beautiful One my soul must sing

You opened my eyes to Your wonders anew
You captured my heart with this love
Because nothing on earth is as beautiful as You

Beautiful One I love
Beautiful One I adore
Beautiful One my soul must sing

Tim Hughes