

2019-03-03 ... 6.30pm Evensong ... Mrs Jane Rylands

**Exodus 3: 1-6; John 12: 27-36a**

Our two readings this evening have in common that God is heard to speak. The Exodus example is a one-to-one conversation – just God and Moses. There seems to be quite a crowd around in the story from John and Jesus says that God’s message is for them to hear, not him. Those of us who were in church this morning heard a third example, in the Transfiguration scene which is addressed to Peter, John and James, the three disciples who had accompanied Jesus up the mountain.

I think it is one of the big questions we have as Christians – how do we know that we are doing God’s will? How do we hear God? I apologise if this is a royal ‘we’ ... and as always, if you can make this a conversation afterwards and add insight to my comments then please do!

One of the first things that comes to mind about God talking to Moses is that it comes out of the blue. We can’t really tell from the story as we are given it in Exodus whether Moses has been brought up to know anything about the Hebrew faith. It appears that he was wet-nursed by his real mother in his real home but then was brought up in the court of Pharaoh’s daughter. I reckon that at the oldest he would have been three at that point. If he then spent time with Hebrew servants as a child, perhaps they would have tried to impart their traditions to him. But it seems that he has to ask God who he is – **‘I am who I am’ God says** – and God tutors him in how he is to talk to the elders of Israel about who the message is from. So, no surprise really, God can, if he wants, speak quite clearly to anyone he wants, whether or not there exists a prior relationship between them.

The second thing that comes to mind about this episode is that the method of God’s approach is very bespoke. What we know about the adult Moses is that he can’t keep his nose out of things – so far in the story he has got involved in three fights! God sets up a non-burning burning bush. Moses just cannot walk by, he has to go and investigate this anomaly. So, perhaps how God will choose to speak to me is not exactly how he will choose to speak to you.

One thing which really interests me about the message that John describes is how it is heard. I think we are supposed to understand that everyone heard the message and heard the same message because Jesus says – this voice has come for your sake, not for mine – but some describe it as thunder and some as an angel’s voice. I think they must have heard in a way that they would each understand it as God’s voice – so depending on their pre-conceptions to a certain extent – but that’s me guessing really.

At the Transfiguration, a cloud descends on them which terrifies the three disciples, and the voice comes from the cloud. Frustratingly, we don’t know what it is that terrifies them so – is it the loss of orientation which being in thick fog brings, or is it that they sense how close they are to God? And it seems that they didn’t talk about this momentous event for quite some time. The message was - **This is my Son, my Chosen: listen to him!** There is no expressed reason for not sharing the message or experience and we only know that they ‘kept silent in those days’. Clearly, they recounted it at some point but I wonder whether that was before or after Jesus’s death?

I cannot bring to mind any occasion that I have heard or read about, other than in the Bible, when God’s voice has been heard simultaneously by a group of people. So how might we expect to hear God’s voice today? Can we expect to hear God’s voice today?

I am currently reading a book called *Red Moon Rising* by Pete Greig. It tells the story of the beginning of the 24/7 prayer movement about twenty years ago. It is a movement for spiritual renewal aimed particularly at the young. Pete had received a vision that he didn't understand but spent a good deal of time thinking about. Once he got the idea for 24/7 the movement grew quickly, supported by many God-incidences. Groups set up a prayer room and a rota for all day all night prayer initially, at least, for a week and many have committed their lives to Christ as a direct result and yet Pete says:

- I guess I'm not the most spiritually discerning guy in the world. When I get intense and try to hear God, I normally don't. When I do get the word of the Lord it's often by mistake while I'm busy doing something else. And so wandering around Herrnhut, a simple thought occurred to me. There were no violins in the sky or bearded strangers muttering confirmation; just an idea that wouldn't go away.

He also says:

- I'm not very good at hearing God's voice. I often get it wrong and have learned to cover myself to save embarrassment! When he does get through to me it is often as I contemplate, write and dialogue. For me there are times in discussion and even in writing when my heart beats a little bit faster. It's as if the PA system has been turned up spiritually and I just know that my words are mysteriously forming shapes around something God is saying.

One of the things which all these examples have in common is **holy space**. I think this may be an important concept if we want to hear God.

Moses was shepherding his father-in-law's flock by Mount Sinai, the mountain of God – although it is not absolutely certain if the mountain gained its holy place status before or after the burning bush incident. But God tells Moses that he must take his shoes off because he is standing on holy ground, so Moses understands that he is entering a holy space.

Perhaps it is enough in the New Testament example that Jesus is there, but it also happens at a spiritual time and place, as the believers of the world gather in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover.

The Transfiguration similarly is on a mountain made holy by the presence of Jesus, Moses and Elijah.

I was possibly attracted to the Pete Greig quotes that I chose because they resonate with my own experience. I date my becoming a Christian to a Christian Union Mission Week at university. I think my personal spiritual space had been created by my spending an evening reading the Gospel of St Mark with a curious mind. In retrospect, there would have been much prayer in the air from those involved in the Mission. I walked onto campus the next morning asking God for proof that he was there and that I wasn't making a fool of myself. What I received was a sensation not words, but I was quite clear at the time what it meant.

When I started what was called the Pathways course, I wasn't looking to be a Reader but to be a better educated Sunday School teacher. I had no vision of myself preaching. The last element of the course was a quiet day with several sessions of scripture reading followed by time alone to ponder.

It was the last passage that brought me to the surprising response that perhaps I was supposed to be a Reader.

Pete Greig's 'simple thought' occurred to him in Herrnhut, a small village in Eastern Germany, where in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century 300 Moravian refugees began a season of continuous, as in all day, all night, every day, continuous prayer for Christian Unity, spiritual renewal and world mission which ended up lasting for a staggering hundred years with hundreds of missionaries being sent out round the world.

The contemporary version of 24/7 involves the setting up of a prayer room – a space where scripture can be read, music can be played, and where prayers can be written and shared. Their experience has been that these rooms quickly pick up a feeling of being a holy space which draws people in. I think we benefit from something similar each time we walk into St Alkmund's.

But you, one, can walk into St Alkmund's in two ways. You can come in just to admire the architecture, the stained glass or in the hope of finding a loo ... OR you can come in, expectant of coming into a holy place, a place with thin walls between earth and heaven, a place where a conversation with God can happen. That's not to say that God won't catch the attention of the person rushing to the loo, or that this is the only place that a conversation can happen. But I think that being deliberate about choosing a holy space, whether a personal temporary one or a more established religious place is a good starting point.

My final thought about hearing God's word is going to be expressed briefly – **if you want to hear – you must LISTEN!**

Amen