

## Adventures in Prayer Week 3 – Prayer and Listening to the Spirit

Listening to God is part of prayer, and hearing God's voice and discerning God's words are things many of us aspire to, but which we may feel less confident about than we do about talking to God.

One of the reasons we may feel we don't know how to hear God's voice is that we start with the most complex kind of hearing: we ask for the answer to a question, for some information or for an instruction. Like children, we need to learn to listen by stages:

- Babies begin by recognising the sound of the parent/care-giver's voice, long before they understand a single word.
- Then they learn to pick out single words and very simple phrases.
- Then eventually they learn to understand more complex communications and the meaning/intention behind them.

Much the same is true with hearing God: we first learn to recognise the timbre of God's voice, distinguishing it from the many voices that come to us from our external and internal worlds, then we gradually begin to pick out simple words and phrases, then, with time, we discern more complex things.

Since we often seek to hear God through scripture, it's easy to get caught up in hearing through words, but there is more to the voice of God than the words God says. God's voice, like ours, has tone and colour. A helpful picture might be that of Aslan the lion in 'The Magician's Nephew' by C. S. Lewis, singing the world of Narnia into being – a song without words but full of life.

It can be helpful to practice tuning into the living, colourful, resonant voice of God without worrying about exactly which words are being said. See some exercises below for how you might do that.

In John 6, Jesus speaks at length about many complex and profound truths. At the end of his teaching, many stop following him, but others, like Peter, affirm a deeper trust and commitment. Peter, who has probably understood very little of what he's heard, simply says: 'You have the words of eternal life' (John 6:68). He has caught something of the tone of God's voice through Jesus' teaching, without quite understanding all the words.

When Peter talks about Jesus having the 'words' of eternal life, the term he uses for 'words' is a variant on the Greek word 'Rema'. A Rema word is a 'now' word or a

prophetic word, a word which is pertinent at that moment – and such words are often disarmingly simple. Perhaps Peter doesn't yet understand the full complexity of Jesus' revelations about himself, but he is tuned to the tone and he is discerning the words God most wants him to hear at that moment. Having practiced recognising God's voice by its tone, we might then move on to discerning simple 'Rema' words which God is speaking to us – words which are pertinent to us and the situations we face today. Again, see some exercises below for practising this kind of hearing.

### Questions for reflection

- How easy do you find it to know when God is speaking to you? Do you find God's voice easy to pick out from the many voices around and within you?
- Are there situations or environments where you find it particularly difficult to tune into the Spirit?
- Have you ever heard a voice which purported to be God but which had a tone that didn't seem to fit with what you know of God's character?
- Are there things which help you to tune into the tone/colour of God's voice – being outdoors, listening to music, reading certain kinds of writing, watching certain TV shows, for instance?
- Has a single word or simple phrase ever completely changed your day, either for the worse or for the better?
- What do you think the Apostle Peter meant by 'the words of eternal life'? What might be 'words of life' for you today?

### Prayer activities

1. Spend some time doing something which helps you to connect with God in a wordless way – something which helps you hear the sound of God's voice without trying to listen for particular words. You could listen to some instrumental music or walk and enjoy looking at the beauty of creation for instance. Enjoy noticing the feelings which are stirred in you and the impressions which come to your mind.
2. Find a favourite scripture passage and read it slowly and reflectively, imagining the tone of voice Jesus might use if he were reading it to you.
3. If you enjoy drawing or painting, get a blank canvas/piece of paper and begin creating. Just see where the Spirit takes you. When you've finished, notice what you've created and what it seems to be saying to you.



4. Choose a passage of scripture and practice Lectio Divina: reading it through slowly, several times, noticing the word or phrase which the Spirit draws your attention to.
5. Do you know of someone who's in need of consolation today? Ask God to give you a word or simple phrase to share with them as an encouragement. Try not to interpret it or add to it, just offer it to them as a gift and a blessing.