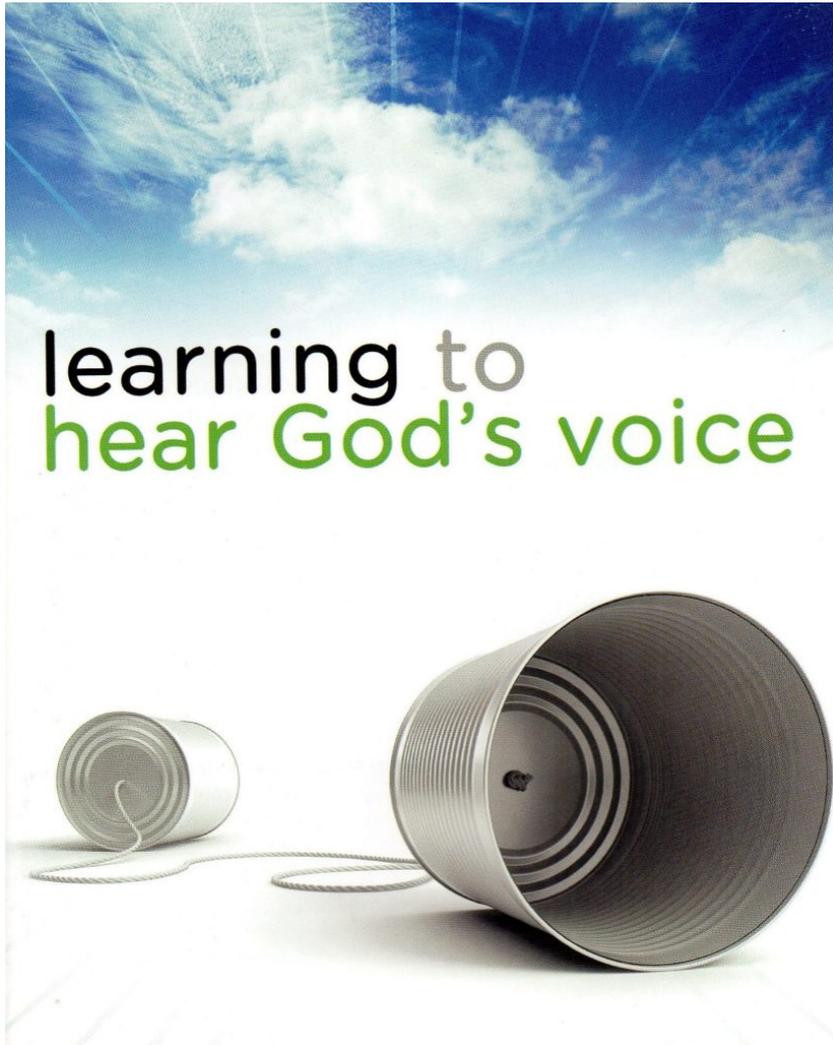


'Learning to Hear God's voice', May 26th, 2019  
Sixth Sunday of Easter.  
Acts 16:6-16



'Learning to Hear God's voice', part 4, May 26th, 2019

Imagine, you are with Paul, part of his missionary team, in Troas. Troas, a seaport, . Close to the Hellespont, which we call the Dardanelles, which if you continue NE takes you to Gallipoli. You are in Troas. How would you feel or think?

I mean you have been prevented from going two directions by the Spirit and maybe you have no clue how you ended up here, yet you have been faithfully seeking the Lord, living out being an active missionary minded love filled Christian. "Lord, **how** did I end up here?" you may be praying?

Or, "Lord why am I here, I've followed your direction and I am, it seems at a dead end?"

This is the fourth part of Hearing God's voice, we continue to learn from our scriptures what this means in practice.

Paul is on his secondary missionary expedition. From what we have heard read of Paul's plans and desires, as a writer put it "the invasion of Europe was not in the mind of Paul, but it was evidently in the mind of the Spirit." (Campbell Morgan, quoted by John Stott, *Acts*, pg 258). In this journey, "the good seed of the gospel is planted in European soil" (Stott, *Acts*, p258).



Paul's original intention, now completed, was to strengthen churches from the first missionary journey. He is close to the border of the Province of Asia. Paul and his companions looked to the SW, towards Colosse - 240 km away or Ephesus a similar distance away - to preach the gospel. And off they went down this Roman road. In some undescribed yet clear way, the Spirit prevented them. Perhaps it was through a prophetic utterance (as Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 14), in one of the Christian communities. Perhaps it was something that Silas 'received' as Acts 15:32 reminds us that Silas was a prophet. In whatever way, the Spirit said NO. The intention was good but the Holy Spirit said no.

So the SW route is blocked. They turned north. They reach the border of Mysia, they plan to go north to Bithynia an area to the south side of the Black Sea. Yet the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. The Spirit said again no.

Just on a side note, note the two interchangeable terms that Luke uses here. v6 - the Holy Spirit; v7 - the Spirit of Jesus.

How did the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, do it with Paul, Silas and Timothy? Was it a thought that would not leave them, was it a voice like Philip heard to go near the chariot, was it an inner impression held by all three companions, was it a lack of peace as they walked further along? They had come from the east, they found the SW, and the North roads blocked. Only route left is NW and they arrive in Troas. What is being shown in Acts, is that God directs the mission of the Church and the progress of the gospel both in terms of space and timing. (cf Steven Croft, *Missionary Journeys, Missionary Church*, pg.38).

A writer said: "They must have been in a state of considerable perplexity, wondering what God's plan and purpose were, for so far their guidance had been almost entirely negative." (Stott, *Acts*, p.260). Not unlike prophet Samuel. Remember. After God rejects Saul as King over Israel, Samuel is told to go to the family of Jesse and Bethlehem to anoint the new king. He is anxious. Lord confirms he is to go. So he arrives. Calls Jesse and his sons to the feast. And as we know, all 7 line up and not anyone is God's anointed one. I feel sorry for Samuel. Is his next question to Jesse, faith filled or a bit confused, "are these all the sons you have?" He is asking: 'you don't have any other sons do you?' And David is sent for. A positive result. But after time. After some uncomfortable time. Was it minutes or hours? Samuel wanted to get in and out, fearing word would get to Saul. God did not speak, perhaps, as quickly or clearly as Samuel would have liked.

Acts 16: 8b is important. "and went down to Troas." We can be in a place where we wonder - 'Lord why am I here? We have been led so far and the guidance seems to have come to an end.' We are like Samuel as the second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh son has been rejected. What do we do? What next?

Why do we think Paul went to Troas? I give two possible reasons?

One could be. He is choosing to set aside time to work this out. With Chutzpah - direct speaking as we see in the psalms - like Ananias in the vision who says, politely to Jesus, he shouldn't go see Saul, because of all Saul has done to the Church, a fact which Jesus is very aware of! So one reason could be. And an example to us. Paul and the others want to set aside time. Saying "Lord we are here. We need to here. You brought us here. And we are not budging until you speak."

Another different reason could be. Paul is ready to go home to Antioch. He has had the Spirit saying no, twice. Maybe, he thinks, he has done all he was meant to do on this second trip. He was only meant to strengthen those new church plants, and there is a reason he needs to return to Antioch, work is to be done. Time to get a ship back. His horizon is perhaps not as wide as God's.

To be honest. We can be in both these places. We can be full of faith. We have gone as far as we can in guidance. And we happily put up our tent and say, in faith, "Lord what is next?"

Other times it can be confusing, frustrating. "Lord I seem to have ended up in a dead-end?" So we think we have gone as far as we can.

V8b is important because so many testimonies about God guiding mention an inbetween time but then the Lord speaks and all is fine, and nothing often is said about that gap.

But to be in that moment, to be waiting in Troas, it can be hard. It is hard because we may doubt, did I listen to the Lord at all. Am I here because I got it all wrong?

It can be hard because it means *patience*, we need to have it. This week we come to Ascension. A wonderful Festival. Now, we know they were to wait for the Spirit. They knew when he would come, didn't they? No, they knew he would come, *but not when*. They return to Jerusalem and pray. We knew it was 10 days, they didn't know how long. Patience they showed.

Are you a patient person? If you are married, ask your spouse if you aren't sure! You all know the thinking of today that our culture shapes many of us to not be naturally patient people. I have a program on my laptop that tells me how fast the last startup was on my PC, and how it has improved it. We have an old phone that took so many seconds. Now our new phone almost broke the sound barrier at booting up. But you still wait for the Iphone that will start at the speed of light.

Does this affect our spiritual lives? Do we become less patient. So, can an issue about Hearing God's voice be, be affected by our level of patience, to wait for him to speak? We bring it once to God, and he does not speak - in any way - and we wonder if he has gone to sleep, or that this whole Hearing God's voice thing God Grant is sharing about is a bit silly. Are we willing to bring it back again? Are we able to be patient to wait for him to speak...

Patience. Paul needed to have it. But it was a hard time perhaps for Paul - we don't know how long he was in Troas before the vision came - it can be a hard time for some of us. If you are in such a place, please do see our prayer ministry team as a safe

space you can bring such an issue, they will pray with you in confidence.

Yet it is possible that we ended up in Troas, in our past. But, in our mind, we *never got that* Macedonian call and so we got on the ship and headed home, or went back the way we came. And inside us, it knocked our confidence or let us spiritually confused. I wanted to share a story. In 1999, as part of the discernment by the Church of England, if I was called to be trained as a priest, I did an intern year you could call it - 9 months working in a town near Birmingham, experiencing the breadth of C of E worship and mission, reading, involved in ministry, and shared a house with two others in the same process. It was so enriching for me. Five years later, I wanted to help set up something in the town where i had my curacy.

I talked to my trainee minister Nigel. I talked to the Diocese. I involved local ministers many who were up for it. All in favour. We had the scheme set up. We had the free accommodation. We advertised in a national Christian magazine, and had some great advert work done. We had some vague interest. We had one candidate whom we interviewed and who wasn't appropriate we realised. Then the accommodation fell out. And the Diocese weren't sure. And it all ended. I spent a good year working on that. Nothing came out of it.

Now. I remember praying in my study months later. It had seemed God's guidance, confirmed through so many ways. I was really annoyed with God on that. And, months later, it bubbled up, I told him I felt I had wasted a year on this - I do believe in telling God exactly how you feel about things as he knows

already - and, in that prayer, God spoke back, in my mind, with a question: Was Stephen a waste?

I knew what the Spirit was referring to. Stephen the martyr, in Acts 6 & 7. Servant, miracle worker, teacher, probably young up and coming Christian, then stoned to death. I told God, yes Stephen was a waste. Then it came to mind. Saul - how was Saul affected by watching Stephen's death? Suggesting that what Saul had seen was part of Saul's journey to Christ.

And then the final thought in my mind - "nothing is ever wasted with God."

So, about that project, I could have felt, I have ended up in Troas. A waste of a journey. Yet with God nothing is wasted, if we journey with him. But if I had not taken time to talk to God about this really honestly, how I was confused, even a bit let down, then maybe this would have rattled around inside me and influenced other parts of my ministry and discernment. And in that praying, I learned an insight, that, has helped and shaped my ministry since then.

So if you are someone who feels, in the past, God led you so far and you don't know what it was all about. Do bring this again to the Lord if you do not have peace or perhaps you have pain about it. Again, the prayer ministry team is a safe place to bring such events of the past to the Lord.

To move on. Only in Troas, do they receive a positive lead. They may not have thought it or maybe they did, but *they were* in the perfectly right place, yet they just didn't know it. You see Troas's harbour faces west to Macedonia. Paul has the dream - a vision

- an audio-visual event, where they see a figure and hear him speaking - a vision of a man "Come over to Macedonia and help us." Paul tells the others the vision, they conclude God had called them to go to Macedonia. And off they go. If they did not have a broad enough horizon, then God dramatically enlarged it in those hours.

As we said last week about process and testing. Revelation, Interpretation, Application.

Paul models it here. The Revelation is shared. When we have an impression, a vision, a scripture striking us strongly. The question we ask: Is it from the Lord? 'Is it from you Lord?'

Yes Paul and the others discerned.

What is the interpretation - Lord what does it mean?

And application - what are the implications - Lord what do you want me to do with this?

In this case, it is not Paul discerning, but all four of them as the language "We" suggests Luke has joined Silas, Paul and Timothy. Acts shows discernment by others and not just by a single person. At times our testing needs to involve others, if the Lord is speaking. *They concluded*. The Greek word used means *to bring together, to put together in one's mind*. They looked at the data. Used their minds. They concluded, the Lord was speaking, and they are to go and they find a ship. It wasn't in Paul's mind when he began. That is clear from the places he had wanted to go. Yet it was in the mind of the Spirit. And in Troas they discover and discern the 'Go' the Spirit is now saying.

In Paul, Timothy and Silas experience, we see the double guidance of the Spirit which Paul, Timothy and Silas experience. Prohibition and Permission.

They are forbidden in one direction; restrained from going; Invited in another, constrained in another. One way the Spirit says 'go not', the other he calls "come". A writer said, in our day to day lives, "we need to trust Him for our guidance and rejoice equally in his restraint and constraint" When hearing God's voice, we need to be open to him saying 'no' to something; but also to be open to God voice saying 'yes' to things.

To finish. We have discussed the times when we are waiting for God to speak and the need for patience. That there can be past times that have knocked our confidence when it just made no sense. And that it can be hard waiting for the next part of God's guidance - whether that is through scripture, the workings of the Spirit, through the counsel of others, through circumstantial signs or through our common sense.

In Acts 16, the missionaries clearly use their heads, yet clearly also remain open to the guidance of the Spirit in strategic decisions. To quote FF Bruce: "Paul's missionary journeys display an extraordinary combination of strategic planning and keen sensitiveness to the guidance of the Spirit of God, however that guidance was conveyed - by prophetic utterance, inward prompting, or the overruling of external circumstances." (Bruce, Acts, pg 306)

We have covered some ways in the past 4 weeks how he can speak. We use our minds in our planning yet we seek to be sensitive to the hearing God's voice. A reminder that the Lord is

Sovereign how he chooses to speak. How he speaks to one may be different from another. How he spoke to us once may not be how he speaks again in another situation. He can speak through scripture to us, through an image in our mind when we pray, through a dream or vision ( as we shared Peter and Paul both had), through a persistent thought or impression, such as a lack of peace. Possibly through an audible voice - heard with our own ears - as John records in Revelation, as Ananias a disciple not an apostle heard in Damascus, as Philip heard near the Ethiopian chariot. He may speak through others, as Paul indicates in 1 Corinthians 14. As people praying for us, they may feel one of above stated examples are relevant for us and they carefully, gently offer that to us, like on an open hand, saying I think the Lord may be saying... And the Lord may speak through circumstantial signs, events beyond us, where God opens doors or closes doors.

In my experience and life as a Christian, I find I keep on learning how the Lord guides. Sometimes I see it in the moment. Other times, only when I look back. But to return to that above FF Bruce quote. 'We seek to be keenly sensitive to the guidance of the Holy Spirit however that guidance is conveyed.'

We simply to be led by the Holy Spirit, by the Spirit of Jesus. We seek to be people, who will conclude what God has called us to do, and we will go...

Let us be still... and after that a prayer.

God the Father,  
help us to hear the call of Christ  
and to follow in his service, whose kingdom has no end;  
for he reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, one glory. Amen.