

Acts 16:v1-16, the ministry of prayer (listening).

Father, give us afresh your Holy Spirit, that these spoken words may be faithful to the written word and lead us to the Living Word, and that these words will bear the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. Amen.

Introduction.

Pete Greig says: **“Prayer is a living conversation with a loving God, which means we must listen as well as talk.” (Pete Greig)**

He shares a story from a few years ago. He was stranded in Chicago. All the flights had been grounded due to the eruption of a volcano on Iceland. So he couldn't get home to England. He decided to ask God, how He wanted Pete to use this interruption. Now, a number of American friends had already invited him to stay until flights resumed. But he says, as he prayed, he found himself thinking about a friend who lived 240 km away in Madison, Wisconsin. So Pete got out his computer and emailed his friend “Hey I am in Chicago can I come and crash on your couch.”

What Pete didn't know he said, was that his friend Joe had received terrible news. Pete also didn't know that Joe's wife – as she worried – asked Joe, ‘Who do you wish you had on your couch right now.? Those were her exact words.

Pete didn't know what Joe had replied : “I wish Pete was on my couch, but I know that's crazy as he is in England and he's never ever been to our home.”

Greig says . Within hours of Joe's throw-away line, I had materialized on his couch.” (Greig. How to Pray, p139-140).

Acts 16 is our focus. At the heart of this passage is God's guidance. Learning to hear God's voice – in its various forms and expressions - and to live in submission and obedience to it, is a foundational skill, which we can all grow in throughout our lives. It is important skill also when we are praying with others, in a life group, when visiting a friend.

Overview of Acts.

What happens in Acts 16, was something common in the life of the Early church. Let us have a quick journey through Acts, beginning on Pentecost.

Acts 2

When the Spirit is poured out, the Prophet Joel is quoted by Peter “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.’ These words describe a prophetic church – where male, female, all types and all sorts – can experience God speaking to them and through them to others.

Peter goes on to say: “Repent and be baptised every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, . The Promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

The Holy Spirit is for all and the assumption is prophecy is one of the gifts the Lord will want to release among Christians. God’s supernatural voice – in its various forms, visions, dreams, prophecy – will form part of the life of the church.

Acts 8

Philip has gone to Samaria.

There is an angel who speaks to him – go south to the desert road – just direction, no reason.

He sees the chariot of an Ethiopian – and then ‘the Spirit told Philip: go to that chariot and stay near it.’ Within Philip is an openness to the voice of the Lord – no indication of him being in prayer in a traditional sense, but he was open to its sudden inbreaking.

He is available to the voice, he obeys the voice, and the voice leads to an opportunity – as he hears Isaiah being read - and he seizes it. So the voice of God and evangelism – God speaking not only to an individual, or for the building up of the church, but also to help share the Christian faith...

Acts 9,

we explored last week. Saul is converted. Then in Damascus, Ananias, a disciple, not an apostle, pastor, priest, prophet or evangelist or teacher, a disciple has a vision. He obeys the word. A difficult, dangerous word. But a word that helps a new fellow believer. That word leads Ananias into the ministry of prayer with another.

Acts 10

We have another vision, with Peter on the roof – but a different type of vision, with images of animals. Again Peter has conversation with the Lord about what he thinks about it. Just after the vision has ended, some men arrive, and the Spirit speaks in a different way. A voice – in his mind or maybe audibly: ‘Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them.’

It is a chapter which seems to suggest that God remains sovereign over the ways he uses – we have an angel to Cornelius, the vision to Peter, the voice / very strong impression to go with the representatives.

It is a vision of course and a voice which has ramifications for the early church and it is again evangelistic – to go to a non believer.

Acts 13

In Antioch there are Prophets and teachers. While worshipping and fasting the Holy Spirit says "set apart Paul and Barnabas for the work which I have called them." A hard word for the church – to give up their two most senior leaders. It may have seen illogical but the Lord had a plan. The Spirit speaks to them as a group of leadership.

And after further fasting and prayer – for Paul and Barnabas – they send them off. "The gift of the Spirit ... determines and regulates the expansion of the church mission."

Acts 16 – our reading today. Paul wants to take the westward road – to the coast of what is now Turkey. But it says. "They were kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word of God in Asia." Bit of a shocker. I mean. Didn't Jesus say 'go and make disciples of all nations.' Paul wants to plant a church for every unreached group, in every city. The Spirit says no.

So he seeks to go north to Bithynia. It is the next logical, common sense, strategic step, following the great commission. It was the area of the city of Nicaea and other Jewish settlements. He, Silas, and Timothy are forbidden again. 'When they tried to enter Bithynia, the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to.' On these two occasions, we do not know how the Spirit stops them – was it a picture, was it a vision, was it a thought that lingered and wouldn't leave, , was it a feeling, was it a dream.

So NW to Troas.

They are on a 644 KM journey, by foot, not knowing what was going on. That is a bit shorter than the distance from here to the German Polish border! And only in Troas does the vision comes. A Macedonian man who says 'come over and help us.' "After Paul had the vision, we got ready at once, to leave for Macedonia concluding God had called us to preach the gospel to them." The Spirit has spoken, they had a revelation. They discerned – as a group - the interpretation and application of this revelation. The mission is moving into new territory.

FF Bruce wonderfully says: **"Paul's missionary journey's display an extraordinary combination of strategic planning and keen sensitiveness to the guidance of the Spirit of God – however that guidance was conveyed." (FF Bruce).** He used his brain, his common sense, he chatted to others, he read the scriptures – we know Paul was a man of the Bible, he was a leader, strategic - and he was also as Bruce says, a person with: 'keen sensitiveness to the guidance of the Spirit of God however that guidance was conveyed.'"

The gospel enters Europe, and Lidia will be saved and a new church will be established in Philippi. Bruce adds: "The Spirit's interventions did not frustrate Paul's strategy, but enhanced its effectiveness." (Acts, Bruce, p.308).

To think about

When we consider what it means to be a Spirit filled, Spirit shaped, Spirit led community, openness to the Lord speaking through Scripture and through other means is part of what He seeks to grow within us.

And when we compare the various experiences of the Spirit, and the angelic and visionary directions, it gives us a picture as James Dunn says **“of almost unending and apparently arbitrary variety which emerges.** Like why does an angel speak first to Philip to send him out of Samaria to the desert, and then the Spirit. Why is a vision for Peter, then the Spirit speaks? Why is an angel speaking? Another time it is a man saying ‘come over and help us?’ and other times, the Lord Jesus speaking. There is no apparent pattern in this!”

Learning to hear God’s voice: How can we grow in this?

Everyone can do this. Can everyone ride a bike? You know living in the Netherlands, you’d probably think that every child is like born with an ability to ride a bike!

How did you learn to ride a bike?

Well God’s voice, I feel, is like riding a bike – everyone can learn, but it takes time and some practice – and some willingness to mess up. Hearing God’s voice is a privilege. We may feel the weight of this. But in seeking to hear God’s voice, at times, we will make mistakes.

Paul in 1 Corinthians 14, talks about the need for discernment – suggesting that sometimes we can believe we know God is speaking, but in fact he is not. Yet if we do not want to make a mistake, we may never try to listen for God’s voice.

Seven tips how to hear God’s voice. All begin with B.

1.Be in Prayer.

We do not have, because we do not ask, James tells us. Luke 11, Jesus says that if we know how to give good gifts to our father, “who much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

We ask God to give the Holy Spirit, for him to come, to be present. Someone wrote. ‘There is power in stopping everything else we are doing and praying. There is something about being still and listening for God’s voice to speak.’ Of course God can speak when we are not praying. Phillip is an example in Acts. But a good place to start – to set aside him – and ask him to speak.

2.Be at Peace.

Do not be stressed. Be relaxed. Do not try too hard about God speaking. It is about God speaking.

3.Be okay.

Be okay if it doesn’t happen right then. It may take patience. We do not know how many times Paul etc prayed on that journey to Troas – but the Lord was silent.

4. Be open.

There are so many ways – we have already said – that he can speak. We need to be careful if we only expect or want him to speak in one way. He is creative.

5. Be attentive.

It can be the thought that comes into mind – and it lingers – like Pete and his friend. Or the first thought may not be the right one. Elijah experiences various ways of God speaking yet only at the end, that is the one.

6. Be discerning.

That leads us to be discerning. There can be all sorts in our head. How do we discern between God's voice, our voice, the enemy's voice, or random thoughts. As we said we can ask a few questions:

A simple test for any word:

is it scriptural – for we reject anything that goes against God's Bible.

Do we generally have peace – though of course, our own anxiety can cloud our peace...

Does what has come to mind build up, strengthen, comfort?

Anything life directional, usually I'd suggest that is tested and shared with someone else, if it is a word to be shared.

7. Be bold and obey – if it is for you.

Be bold and speak up – if it is for others.

There are words that God speaks for you – your life, or to pray for your family, friends, street. Our response is obedience. We change our lives activities to align with his words.

Our response to words for others – we share them humbly, in a loving kind way 'this came to mind ... I think maybe God is saying.' We share with an open hand – they choose whether to take it, accept it. And after we share, we ask, 'did it make sense, does it with connect with you?' By sharing and then asking, we begin to discern what is God and what is not.

So practically:

Be in prayer,

Be at peace

Be okay if it doesn't happen right then.

Be open

Be attentive

Be discerning

Be bold and obey,

be bold and speak up.

So I want to suggest that this week, you would set aside time to listen to God this week.

To listen for yourself.

To listen for someone else.

And next week to share with others, what happened – what worked for you? What did not work?

But this week to also ask yourself – do I have any fears about hearing God's voice for myself or for others? What do you think you can do with those fears? How do you think you can overcome them?

The first step will be to lift any fears to God in prayer and admit the fears / doubts. God knew Paul was afraid when he spoke to him in Corinth, Jesus knew Thomas doubted in that upper room. It may be a helpful to talk to a trusted Christian friend or share in your life group.

Acts 16 was our focus. Paul's second missionary journey, when the gospel, enters Europe. At the heart of this passage is God's guidance. **Learning to hear God's voice – in its various forms and expressions - and to live in submission and obedience to it, is a foundational skill, which we can all grow in throughout our lives.**

So shall we pray...

Lord of heaven and earth,
as Jesus taught his disciples to be persistent in prayer,
to ask, keep asking, seek keep seeking, knock keep knocking,
give us patience and courage never to lose hope,
but always to bring our prayers before you;

Would you help us to listen, and when we hear, to obey.
help us in these days til Pentecost, to grow in wisdom and prayer
so that we may pray in the Spirit on all occasions will all kinds of prayers and requests for
ourselves
and for all the saints.
in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.