

John 21: 1-19. Easter 3. April 10th

If I was to begin my sermon by claiming that during the week I had heard a voice from heaven instructing me what to say to you, I think I can predict your reaction. Most, if not all of you, would be sceptical, some would be convinced that old age hadn't only affected my legs, but my head also, and some of you would be glad you were sitting near a door and could make a quick exit. We all know that the only ones nowadays who hear voices from heaven are feverishly sick people, junkies who have overdone their fix, or the mentally disturbed. Yet, if the Bible is to be believed, it was not so in the past when many people claimed to have heard God's voice and, when they went public, no-one appears to have turned a hair.

In fact we have just heard of three people who professed to have had such an experience. There is Saul of Tarsus, a devout Pharisee, implacably opposed to the followers of Jesus. When the Church's first martyr, Stephen, was stoned to death he was happy to look after the clothes of those who were doing the stoning, and when the squalid business was over he obtained authorisation to go to Damascus to arrest any Christian he found there. But underneath something else seems to have been bubbling for on the road to Damascus there came, we are told on his own authority, a voice from heaven, a blinding light and the beginning of the transformation of Saul the Pharisee into Paul the Apostle, an event that changed the history of the world.

Ananias also asserted he had heard the voice of God. We know little of him, except that he was a man of prayer, for he was on his knees when the experience occurred; we also know that he was cautious, he couldn't believe that the voice was asking him to go to a murderous persecutor of the Church and hold out to him the hand of Christian fellowship. He argued with God. Who wouldn't? Finally he went on his hazardous errand and Saul heard and we hear words as extraordinary as any you will find in the Bible, *Brother Saul. Brother!* Amazing.

And there is Simon Peter by the Sea of Galilee. He and his mates had returned to their fishing, gone back to where it had all started and taken up again the familiar life and work they had enjoyed before they met Jesus. Then Simon Peter heard a voice from the shore, a voice he recognised, he plunged into the sea and fell at the feet of the mysterious figure who had called to him. Scarcely a voice from heaven but, for him, the voice of God.

Are these all illusions? Were these voices really heard? Has it all been made up to bamboozle us? I think not, but the problem is that if these accounts are true why does no-one hear God's voice today? And why would you disbelieve me if I said that God had spoken to me this week? Of course, God didn't speak to me this week, yet I do believe he still speaks and speaks very often. In the winter of 1956 I met someone who said he had heard God's voice, and I believed him. I was then a minister in a small fundamentalist, evangelical denomination. My congregation was small and self-supporting. If I told you the weekly pay on which I had to keep a wife and child I don't think you would believe me. It was a pittance. I was paid on a Sunday, but one Thursday evening there wasn't a slice of bread in the house, the only food was for the baby. A three days fast would do me a world of good in my now overweight days, but in those days I was only skin and bone, by Sunday I would have resembled a famine victim. We said a prayer, tightened our belts and prepared for three Spartan days. At about half past nine there was a knock on the door. On the pavement stood a man I had never set eyes on before and was never to see again. I never discovered his identity and we hadn't told anyone of our plight. He held a cardboard box which he thrust into my hands. *I was on the bus going to Manchester,* he said, *and the Lord told me to bring this to you.* Then he disappeared leaving me clutching the box which was full of food. It was 60 years ago, but if Rita was alive, she could tell you precisely what that box contained. We did not go hungry.

I am not attempting to show how the Lord looks after his own. Even in Britain that night there must have been many families in a similar plight, and the number throughout the world must have been myriad. That night many went to bed hungry, some died of starvation.

The Lord certainly didn't look after Harry Merchant and his wife. Harry was an older minister in the same denomination. He had been an officer in the Salvation Army but the Army wasn't radical enough. Harry and his wife were people of great goodness. That same winter they almost perished from cold and hunger. He told me they would press against the wall of their fire-less kitchen hoping to absorb some warmth from the house next door and the blackberries they gathered on the moors was all the food they had to eat some days. They prayed, but no angel with a box of goodies arrived on *their* doorstep.

The question I chewed over for years was, *Why us?*

The answer came years later during a young people's service. I was giving a one-man dramatization of the feeding of the 5,000, most of it ad libbed.. On a cloth in the aisle I had laid five pieces of pitta bread and a couple of oily sardines. Everyone was given a piece of bread and a fragment of fish. I'd intended finishing where the gospel story ends with the crowd returning home well fed. Then it occurred to me to ask, *What if the lad hadn't offered his lunch to Jesus?* I said, *The crowd would have gone away having eaten less than you have eaten this morning.* After the service a lady came up to me and said, *You've answered something I've been puzzling over for years. I've never had the answer to those who accuse God of allowing people to die of hunger. It's simple really, the only hands God has are ours and that's where the answer lies.*

I used the man-on-the doorstep incident in an article I wrote for The Tablet in response to one by Lionel Bloom. After the Holocaust, he wrote, he could never again believe in intercessory prayer, and I cannot blame any Jew for that. I was hoping to show in my article that the failure to answer prayer is often due to human deafness not divine indifference. I failed to convince him, he reacted to my argument and especially to my story with marked coolness, he clearly didn't believe a word of it. Yet he himself had quoted Simone Weil, the Jewish philosopher: *The only power God has is our love.* I don't think Bloom and I were all that far apart.

In John's gospel some Greeks visiting Jerusalem came to Philip and said, *Sir, we would see Jesus.* After Jesus had responded to them, we are told there came a voice from heaven ratifying what Jesus had said and everyone heard the sound. But some said it thundered (I like to think these were the scientists among them), other said, *It is an angel* (maybe these were the poets) and others said, *It is the voice of God.* God speaks, but often all we hear is the thunder.

I wonder what God will say to us this coming week. Perhaps, like Saul, he will want us to make a drastic change in our lives; or, like Ananias, to hold out the hand of friendship to someone; maybe like Simon Peter to renew our commitment to Jesus; or perhaps like that angel on the doorstep to feed the hungry. And I wonder whether we shall recognise his voice.