

Listening for God

**A sermon preached at St Peter's Wolvercote on Sunday 15th January 2006
(Epiphany 2) by Revd Mark Butchers on John 1.43-51.**

John 1.43-51

⁴³The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.' ⁴⁴Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.' ⁴⁶Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.' ⁴⁷When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' ⁴⁸Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?' Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.' ⁴⁹Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' ⁵⁰Jesus answered, 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.' ⁵¹And he said to him, 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'

These days, voices in the air are associated more with madness than divine calling. But which of us has not longed for a definitive message from God? A clear sense of calling? A divine solution for a particular problem? Perhaps we've felt like the author of 1 Samuel that the Word of God seems rare these days – or maybe rather fuzzy as if shouted through several layers of cotton wool. Perhaps we feel like the vicar in David Hare's play *Racing Demon*: "God where are you? I wish you would talk to me, God. And it isn't just me. There's a general feeling. This is what people are saying in the parish. They want to know where you are. The joke wears thin. You must see that. You never say anything."

But has God really given up calling people? Has he given up speaking? Did he once speak in bygone ages, but now no longer? It would be surprising if this were so. The Bible is the revelation of a God who communicates with his creation; a God who calls us into being by his Word and who comes to us as his Word. This is not a silent God. It's not a deist God who starts things off and then leaves us to it. No, this is a God who is involved, who communicates and speaks and calls. Indeed call, Michael Ramsay says, is one of the Bible's great words. From the calling of creation into existence, to the calling of individuals like Abraham, Moses and the disciples, to Christ's

resurrection calling us back into being at death, to the calling of all into the Kingdom, the creation echoes with God's call to us. And that has not stopped. It's not just confined to biblical times. How could it be? If we believe God to be eternally the same, then the God who spoke then, speaks now. He is Word then, and Word now.

But if that is so, how else might we account for the seeming silence sometimes? Or if not silence, the fuzziness of what we hear? If God is not the problem, is it us? Is it our hearing which is at fault?

One of the surprising features of the story of Nathaniel in today's Gospel is the speed with which he acknowledges Jesus as the Son of God and King of Israel. There is no problem with *his* hearing: he immediately understands who Jesus is, feels God's call upon him and responds accordingly. The story is a highly symbolic one, designed to help convey who Jesus is early in the Gospel. It's a rather mysterious encounter: somehow Jesus knows that Nathanael is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit; in other words, a pious, moral Jew. And somehow because Jesus knows that, Nathanael knows that Jesus is the Son of God – all very odd. But perhaps the key to understanding the story lies in the fig tree.

Fig trees in the Old Testament are symbols of peace and prosperity. In Micah for instance, the writer looks forward to a time when people live in peace, each sitting under their own vine and fig tree. But being wonderfully shady, fig trees were also places of meditation as the Midrash Rabba on Ecclesiastes tells us. So when Jesus saw Nathanael under the fig tree, was he perhaps praying? Meditating? Finding stillness and peace in God's presence? Tuning in? I wonder. It would certainly make more sense of the story: Jesus has already seen a depth of spirituality in Nathanael which comes from prayer and meditation. That's why he calls him; but that's also why Nathanael hears so clearly and responds so quickly. He hears God speaking to him through Jesus because he has learnt how to listen to God, praying under his fig tree.

What can we learn from this? Perhaps to plant fig trees and sit under them.

Metaphorical fig trees. To find places and spaces where we can learn to listen, to fine tune our hearing. In current jargon, to find a work-life balance which gives us the time to relax in God's presence and listen to him. Perhaps Nathanael had learnt that. As with the original act of creation or God calling out to Adam and Eve "where are you?"

we are called out of nothingness and sinfulness to be in relationship with God, to be his people, to be sheep of his own fold. But being in relationship with God requires being with him, spending time with him, being attentive to him - just like any human relationship: you don't get to celebrate a Golden Wedding Anniversary, for instance, without spending time with your partner, and being attentive to them. The same is true with God. And yet so often our time with him is swamped by the busy-ness of life or even by highly worthy Christian doing.....We need our fig trees, our spaces, our listening-time.

Perhaps though we feel we *do* already pray and meditate a lot – and yet still we experience silence or only a vague sense of divine communication. Could it be that this seeming silence of God exists for us because we're afraid of what we might hear? Are we unconsciously or semi-consciously blocking God out, fearful of what we might be called to do or be? Reaching up, have we plucked a few leaves from our fig tree and stitched them into coverings to protect us from God's gaze or voice? Have they become a façade we like to project, even to God? And is it that which is muffling his voice? All of us fall into that at times. So perhaps part of our listening needs to be a listening to ourselves, to the fears and pretences which insulate us from God; to the façades we put up.

But as well as improving our hearing, perhaps we also need to adjust our expectations of what we might hear. Unlike Samuel, I have never heard a divine voice in the ether. I was once told what I think was a true story about a rather pious theological college student. He was on his knees in his room praying, when he heard a voice from the air calling his name. He was stunned into silence at first, but when the voice came again and again, he said: "Speak Lord, for thy servant heareth." At which point gales of laughter came from the room above, where some of his rather less pious fellow students were dangling a speaker attached to a microphone outside his window.

I have never experienced a divine voice, but I have experienced a sense of being called to particular tasks or roles; of being guided in decisions; of finding ways forward emerging in prayer. I have experienced help with sermons or writing; a sense of peace and well being in the face of difficult situations; a feeling of oneness with others. I have also felt that God has spoken to me through the Bible or through other people, where a particular word or phrase has suddenly hit home. So I do feel I have

been spoken to by God. But I recognise that there is part of me that wants things much clearer – the “do this” from on high: this is my will for you in this situation, so do it. And yes, it would be very convenient, all neat and cut and dried. But at what cost? At the cost of my freedom, my separate reality as a creature, at the cost of an open relationship with God in which I still have choice. Too great a cost, I think. So perhaps I need to let go of the desire for a divine voice from on high and accept that God speaks in a different way. It’s no less real, but rather fuzzier, through suggestions, hints, feelings. Less clear perhaps, but more respectful of me.

God speaks now – of that I am convinced. How could he not, when he has come to us as the Logos, the Word? It is just that we hearers of the Word are rather deaf than we might be. Yet with practice and with different expectations of how God communicates, we can hear. And perhaps then we’ll be surprised by just how much he has to say to us. Amen.