

What's God saying?

Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Mark 1:21-28

In these recent months I have in my private spiritual life often wondered what God was saying.

It usually goes something like this:

Me – praying, questioning, asking, arguing, being upset, saying sorry, talking, talking, talking.

God – “If I could get a word in edgeways...?”

I have shared the image with you before – of poor old God, sitting up there in heaven on His golden throne, surrounded by fluffy clouds, hands over His ears, eyes tight shut. Prayers like arrows bouncing around Him everywhere, and out of His mouth the words, “Don't they ever shut up?”

The United Church of Christ, and American congregationalist denomination, has run a clever advertising campaign for a number of years. It's called, 'God is still speaking', and reminds us that God still has lots to say to the world and the people of the world. One of the images they use is the punctuation mark of a comma. The idea is, why do we want to use a full stop when God simply uses a comma? What is God saying? God is still speaking.

What does the voice of God sound like? A few years ago when we were putting in the security and alarm systems in the church, there was an option that, instead of a siren going off, a pre-recorded message could have been heard. The engineer wondered if I would like to record something along the lines of, 'This is the Voice of God, why have you broken into My house?' Alas, we settled for the siren.

Rather than wondering what God's voice sounds like, it is surely more important to wonder about what God is saying. We live in a noisy world. Does God have to shout? Does God use situations, not create them, but use them, to reach out to us and make us pay attention? Beneath the noise of the world there is the beauty and the music, and in the beauty and in the music, there is the voice of God.

Conversation with God requires listening and speaking. The dialogue is what connects us to God, and God to us. This kind of communication is the 'staying in touch', a kind of embrace, that is

somewhere near the heart of faith. It says to us that someone else is there, attending to us, listening to us, responding to us, confirming our existence. Speech, ours and God's, "is intimately related to the social, to our need to belong to something larger than the self."ⁱ

God speaks in different ways: through the Bible where different women and men speak from their experience of God speaking through them. That's what prophets and the singers of faith are about. They might not catch all that God has said, but through their lives the words of God explode into the world, and call us to wonder, and think, maybe sometimes challenge, and to apply them to our living. What's God saying? God is still speaking.

Our job is to pay attention, and catch the words that come to us.

The Bible is really important, but the Bible is not the be-all and end all of what God is saying to us. But the Bible does not limit God. If you think the Bible is the last word from God you are worshiping a dead, leather-bound God. God does not live in a book. The Bible has not swallowed God whole. But through this book we hear something of what God says. Are we clever enough, or faithful enough, to understand it? Do we pay attention and listen, and question, and wonder, and live out what we understand God saying?

In the reading from the Old Testament, Moses knows he is coming to the end of his life and his ministry with the children of Israel. Moses did not always enjoy talking to God. It frightened him. The things God said were difficult, and challenging, and hard. I wonder if Moses hoped at times God would say something different. I wonder if Moses, like so many of us at times, wanted to put words into God's mouth. 'This is what God meant to say, this is what God should have said...'
Moses, like prophets and preachers and people of faith learned that's a dangerous thing to do. Indeed, God says to Moses that if anyone does that, they'll die, a rather challenging directive to anyone climbing pulpit steps!

What is God saying, this God Who is still speaking? And who is listening?

A story is told about Mother Teresa of Calcutta. She was being interviewed by a journalist about her life and faith. At one point the interviewer asked her what she said to God when she prayed. "I don't say anything," she replied. "I just listen." "And when you listen," said the interviewer, "what does God say?" "He doesn't say anything," she replied. "He just listens." Before the

bewildered journalist could say anything, she added, “And if you don’t understand that, I can’t explain it to you.”ⁱⁱ

Is it the case that the words God’s speaks are to be found in the inspiration we find in the life of Jesus? It is no coincidence that Jesus is sometimes called God’s living word. Not just the verbal side, but the active side. When Jesus puts His words into action, there God speaks. Where people of faith, and doubt, put their words into action, there God speaks.

This speaking God of ours is to be found in the actions of loving kindness, and faithfulness, and hopefulness that we hear and see and feel in our world today. When God speaks it is not always to give us understanding, though that sometimes happens. When God speaks it is to give us reassurance, and hope.

In these last months, people have faced terrible times. The death of loved ones, and not being able to say their goodbyes or attend funerals. The diagnoses of serious illness, and not being able to talk things through with their nearest and dearest face to face. The ending of relationships, and not being able to move things on and find new love. The spectre of unemployment. The wasted lives and opportunities of young people whose lives are stalled because work is hard to find and education is restricted. I know people have been angry with God, shaken their fist at God, questioned God, doubted God, even walked away from God because there appears to be no word for them, or to them.

I have no glib answer here. But what I have noticed, more often than not, is the speaking God I believe in finding places, music, books, TV programmes, silence, song, films, and people. People to be the vehicle, the conduit, of what God is saying, putting God’s words into actions. God is still speaking.

Not solving everything, or even anything, but connecting, encouraging, emboldening people to go on a little further, with the pain, or the loss, or the frustration, or the isolation. Because in fact God has found a way to speak, to act, to connect. God is still speaking, replacing full-stops with commas. The conversation goes on, and we are invited to listen, and to respond.

The ninety-year old lady who phoned me to say thank you for letting our church to be used as a vaccination centre. The children from South Morningside Primary making Christmas gift boxes

for people who lived on their own. The neighbours who contributed clothing to the clothing store. The people donating food and money to the Foodbank. That young woman poet, Amanda Gorman, reading at the inauguration of President Biden, telling the world that the dawn is our, and that though we are far from being polished and pristine, we should not stop striving. That even as we grieved, we grew. That even as we hurt, we hoped. That her country wasn't broken, simply unfinished. "For there is always light if only we're brave enough to see it, if only we're brave enough to be it."

Do not say to me God is no longer speaking. This God of ours, the God Who still listens. The God Who still speaks.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Jonathan Sacks, Celebrating Life, p78

ⁱⁱ ibid p76