

## **5. The Practice of a Guided Life** **(1 Sam. 3 : 1 – 10 & John 16 : 5 - 15)**

We're getting near to the end of our short series of sermons based on John Ortberg's book, "The Life You've always Wanted". Today is Pentecost, the day when we celebrate God's gift of his Holy Spirit to all his people and in our reading from John chapter 16 we hear that the Spirit comes to guide us.

This morning, as we continue to see how we can train for growth, we are looking at 'The Practice of a Guided Life'. How do we recognise when God is guiding us? What can we do to put ourselves in a place where hearing from God is not just possible but becomes second nature?

It is one thing to talk to God it is quite another thing to listen. The American lecturer and author, Oliver Wendell Holmes once said "*It is the province of knowledge to speak but it is the privilege wisdom to listen.*" Someone else said "*Easy listening only exists on the radio!*"

### **1. Learning to Listen**

Let me take you to the world of the Old Testament – to the time of Eli, the priest of God who we heard about in our first reading. Eli was old but devout and served the Lord at the shrine at Shiloh. We are told in 1 Samuel 3 verse 1 that the word of the Lord was rare in those days. I wonder if that phrase meant that God had stopped talking or that his people had stopped listening. I suspect that it was the latter – that over time people (even priests like Eli) had simply stopped expecting to recognise God's guidance.

Now only once in my life can I say to you that I think I have heard the audible voice of God – it was in extreme circumstances when I needed guidance but wasn't really looking to God for it. I'm not going to go into details now but if you're interested ask me sometime.

It seems to me (given my reading of the Bible and my experience over many years as a Christian) is that the norm for God's people is *not* to hear his audible voice – but never-the-less he still offers us his leading and his guidance. These come to us in the form of promptings within (what we might call 'godly hunches') given by the Holy Spirit. Has anyone had those? They might also come to us through dreams or even dramatic visions. Had any of those?

In this month's Christianity Magazine there is an article about Annette D'Oyley, a Christian fashion designer who has founded a clothing company whose products are organic, fair-trade and sweatshop-free. She writes this about how the company came to be formed.

*"I would like to say that I made that connection between fashion, international development and poverty by myself, but I don't think I did. I think God put it into my head, in the form of a most extraordinary dream. The dream was about a children's clothing company that would produce lovely, fashionable garments, brightly coloured, with pictures of animals on them and they would be made ethically. I woke up and there it was, fully formed in my head. I told my husband about it and he said I should do it. And in April 2008, the first Animal Tails collection arrived."*

God speaks - our part in this is to be trained to recognise his voice; to say as the boy Samuel did – "Speak Lord, your servant is listening." (1 Sam. 3:10)

## **2. Expecting his voice**

The actress Lily Tomlin once said the following line in a play she was appearing in, *"Why is it that when we speak to God we are said to be praying but when God speaks to us we are said to be schizophrenic?"*

Let's break for a moment and in pairs share our answers to the following two questions,

- Do you *expect* God to speak to you?
- Do you *expect* God to guide you?

I believe that God does speak to us and that the Holy Spirit really does offer us guidance and direction – and it's often without our conscious knowledge. As I look back on my life and the way that it has gone I can see clearly that God has guided me through a certain situation or with an important decision. Sometimes I have prayed and asked and received ... sometimes, if I am honest, I think I've just muddled through but God (thankfully) has been able to guide me anyway.

### **3. What Guidance is NOT**

John Ortberg gives some really good advice on what Guidance is not.

#### **It's Not 'Insider Information'**

John Ortberg notes that many people never seem to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit unless it's some big decision – who to marry, a job decision, etc. but actually what they want is not guidance but 'insider information' about which route will lead to happiness, money or success. Real guidance is something much deeper and is involved in all our lives.

#### **It's Not A Badge Of Spirituality**

Hearing God speak or getting these godly hunches is no indication that we are spiritually superior or more holy. There is a story in the Old Testament in the book of Numbers (chapter 22) about a prophet Balaam. God chose to speak to a donkey because he seemingly couldn't get through to the prophet. If that donkey had been one of us perhaps it might have gone back to its stable with a very superior air

about it and if it had done that it would have made a real ass of itself! We are called to listen, to hear and if we do hear then let's just be thankful and not to gloat or make others feel spiritually small.

### **It's Not A Substitute For Action**

We must not just wait around for signs before doing things. God is not a passive God and we are created in his image – we are to be active. So when we face decisions we must actively pray, seek guidance, and then we must actively exercise wisdom, judgement and responsibility in the light of what we feel we have heard.

There is a rider in this and I want to quote from 'The Life You've Always Wanted'. *"God's purpose is not to get us to perform the right actions. His purpose is to help us to become the right kind of people."*

### **4. Pursuing the Guidance of the Spirit**

O.K. all this said, how then do we practice the guidance of the Spirit?

A couple of practical exercises to help us get into training.

#### **Listen Continually**

Remember that Eli and his generation found that God wasn't speaking and that his voice was rare but if they had been more practiced in listening maybe the word of the Lord would have been a frequent occurrence. If we don't expect God's leading then we probably won't receive it.

I remember a couple of years ago driving in my car and suddenly thinking about a member of the congregation. The thought urged me to visit which I did; it turned out to be so right – I believe that was God speaking ... fortunately I was listening but also I acted upon it.

As an exercise, this week as you are interacting with people or going about your daily activities try to be attentive to the prompting of the Spirit. Go with your hunches and see what happens.

### **Listen for the Spirit's voice in other people**

Dear old Eli wasn't much of a listener was he? However he got the hang of it again and on Samuel's third visit to him he realised that God was trying to get through to the boy so he became part of God's guiding voice. Very often we hear the Spirit's voice in the voice of others. The other side of that coin is that if God can speak to us through others then he can also speak to others through *us*.

In the early church the believers would gather together and ask God to guide them on one issue or another. We read in Acts chapter 1 that about one hundred and twenty of them gathered to choose a replacement for Judas – they prayed together, talked, listened and then chose. When we are seeking guidance today it's always good to share with other Christians (choose carefully who we can trust and who we think are good at listening to the Spirit).

### **Practice Listening in Small Matters**

As I said earlier, often we only ask God for help in the big decisions in life but guidance should not be restricted to just the 'biggies'.

I told you last week that I managed to climb Mount Sinai when I was in Egypt; what I don't think I told you was that the day after I was in agony and my legs seized up. The truth is that I should have been in training for the big event but never really got round to it. I am leading a group of forty pilgrims to Egypt next year and believe me I am going to get in training before I do the climb again. I shall start with small hills and make sure that I book into the gym regularly a few months before.

Let's not start expecting guidance in the 'Mount Sinai' decisions in life if we are not training up to listen in the 'foothill' choices; to go with our godly hunches in the mundane everyday situations we find ourselves in.

## **Conclusion**

In preparing his disciples for the coming of the Spirit Jesus told them that this unseen helper was no-one to be afraid of, in fact he would guide them into all truth and guide people to bring glory to Jesus.

God communicated to his followers in the Old Testament, he spoke in a dramatic way through his Son (who he refers to as 'The Word of Life') and so is it so odd to think that a God who spoke the universe into being may want a word or two with us today?

This morning, for all I know, some of you may be facing some 'Mount Sinai' decisions and are desperate for some guidance. But whether or not we have these I suspect that we all could do with some help in our training programme to listen more to God's voice.

Today we remember that God has not left his people alone but has given to us the gift of his Holy Spirit to live in us and make God more real to us. After you have received communion this morning we are offering the opportunity to receive an anointing with oil (a very ancient symbol of being filled with the Spirit). Come and receive the Spirit afresh this morning; come like Samuel, ready to listen ready to receive simply saying to the Lord, "Here I am".