

Listening in Lent: Space for God's Eloquence

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Dear Fulcrum friends,

In her book 'Listening to God', Joyce Huggett quotes a story told by Archbishop Anthony Bloom:

A peasant had formed a habit of slipping into a certain church at a certain time of day with clockwork regularity. There, day by day, he would sit and, apparently, do nothing. The parish priest observed this regular, silent visitor. One day, unable to contain his curiosity any longer, he asked the old man why he came to the church, alone, day in, day out. Why waste his time in this way?

The old man looked at the priest and with a loving twinkle in his eye gave this explanation: 'I look at him. He looks at me. And we tell each other that we love each other.'¹

During Lent, I have been enjoying 'wasting time with God'. I have been meditating on the Psalms of Ascents (Psalms 120-134), and been listening to God through them, in the company of Derek Kidner's perceptive commentary.² In this newsletter we explore Psalm 131.

1. Listening with Humility

Verse one concerns listening with humility. In the first part of this verse, the sin rejected is pride:

O Lord, my heart is not lifted up,
My eyes are not raised too high;

It may be worth comparing this with Proverbs 30:13 'There are those - how lofty are their eyes, how high their eyelids lift!'

In the second part, the sin rejected is presumption.

I do not occupy myself with things
Too great and too marvelous for me.

Pride can lead to undervaluing other people, and presumption can lead to overvaluing oneself.

Joyce Huggett explored with her husband the concept of God having spoken in Scripture and still speaking in the depths of our hearts as we listen to him. She writes:

As we talked, he seemed to put his finger on the nub of the matter with a memorable observation: 'Listening to God is not about *newness* but about *nowness*. It is receiving the applied Word in whatever form God chooses to make it known.'³

She continued with a moving story of a woman:

Having repented of the illicit love-affair, she wandered into the wood to think and to pray. As she continued to pour out the bitterness of her soul to God, she described her life to him as nothing more than fragments of her former self. While she stood, silent and still before God, into her mind came a picture of the fragments she had described: they littered the ground like so many pieces of red clay. As she gazed at the broken vessel representing her life, into the picture came Jesus. She saw the tenderness of his face and observed the sensitivity of his fingers as he stooped down and started to turn over those forlorn fragments. 'Suddenly, he started to piece them together,' she told me. He assured me that, though the vessel was a mess, every tiny piece of the pot was precious. I watched the skill with which he put the pieces together again. He re-created that vessel. He showed me that it would be even more beautiful than it had been before and much more useful. Then, he glazed it and held it up for me to see. I couldn't see a single sign of the joins where the cracked parts had been pressed back together.'⁴

It may be worth comparing two verses in Mark's gospel concerning our relationship to Jesus. The first is presumptuous:

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you'. (Mark 10: 35)

By contrast, on the Mount of Transfiguration, God's voice elicits listening:

'Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!' (Mark 9:8)

2. Listening in Stillness

If verse one of Psalm 131 concerns listening in humility, verse two relates to listening in stillness.

But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
Like a weaned child with its mother;
My soul is like the weaned child that is with me.

This reminds me of a moving, award-winning photograph, 'The Mother Priest,' which was published in the magazine of *The Times* on 17 December 2005.⁵ It may be seen here www.lottaimage.com/themotherpriest.htm

Artur Weiser comments perceptively on this verse:

And just as the child gradually breaks off the habit of regarding his mother only as a means of satisfying his own desires and learns to love her for her own sake, so the worshipper after a struggle has reached an attitude of mind in which he desires God for himself and not as a means of fulfillment of his own wishes. His life's centre of gravity has shifted. He now rests no longer in himself but in God. This gives him his balance of mind, and it also gives him sufficient strength to subordinate his own wishes to the will of God.⁶

It may be worth considering the previous Psalm, the famous '*De profundis*' (Out of the depths...). Psalm 130 verses 1-4 form a cry 'Listen to me, Lord' and verses 5-8 imply 'I listen in stillness'. Verses 5 and 6 affirm:

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;

my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.

This reminds me of John, the beloved disciple reclining next to the heart of his Lord at the Last Supper (John 13: 23). Perhaps it may also be seen to combine with the intimacy of Psalm 131:2. Interestingly and christologically, in John 1: 18 ‘...the only Son who is close to the Father’s heart’, the same greek word, *kolpos*, is used as in John 13:23. Fully human and close to his friend John: fully divine and very close to his Father.

How does this ‘listening prayer’ relate to mission in God’s world? John V. Taylor, in his classic book *The Go-Between God*, commented:

The simple truth that our manner of communication with God moulds the manner of our communication with people throws an entirely new light upon the connection between prayer and mission. Yet it follows quite logically from the fact we noted in the first chapter, that awareness is multi-directional, and that we cannot be opened towards God without being opened also towards the ticking of the clock and towards all the joy and pain of the world.⁷

The passage he refers to, in his first chapter, concerns another story told by Anthony Bloom, in his book *The School of Prayer*.

He tells of an old lady who came asking for his counsel: though she had prayed continuously for fourteen years she had never sensed the presence of God. How could she learn the secret? He gave her wise advice, and later she told him of her first experience. She had gone into her room, made herself comfortable, and begun to knit. She felt relaxed and noticed with content what a nice shaped room she had, with its view of the garden, and the sound of her needles hitting the arm-rest of her chair. And then gradually she became aware that the silence was not simply the absence of sound, but was filled with its own density. ‘And’, she said, ‘it began to pervade me...All of a sudden I perceived that the silence was a presence. At the heart of the silence there was Him.’⁸

In the Anglican Kenyan Service of Morning Prayer there is a moving prayer, based around Psalm 16: 11, which may be used after a period of silence:

Your silence is full, irresistible;
your presence is joy unspeakable.
People drifting into mind
we lift to you and pray they find
 health in sickness,
 life in deadness,
 strength in weakness,
 light in darkness.
Their loss you bear, mysteriously;
Your peace you share, eternally.⁹

Conclusion

Psalm 131 concludes with an exhortation in verse 3:

O Israel, hope in the Lord
From this time forth and for evermore.

How can we hope in the Lord and apply some of these lessons of 'listening prayer' to our daily lives? We conclude with a warning, some encouraging advice and a poem.

Donald Nichol, in his seminal book 'Holiness', commented:¹⁰

Verbiage is the mark of a person who is full of himself. There is no room in him for God because such a person is already full, preoccupied with his own opinions.

The Trappist Abbot John Eudes once gave Henri Nouwen some advice about combining prayer and creativity:

- Establish a new rhythm of prayer, make it known, and make it a priority.
- Make a daily discipline of listening prayer a must by plotting periods of the day when you determine that you will 'waste time' with God.
- Recurring days of retreat will be really fruitful only when this daily discipline is firmly established.
- Integrate prayer and work: 'Lecturing, preaching, writing, studying and counselling...would be nurtured and deepened by a regular prayer life.'¹¹

In the late silence of Christmas Eve 2003, I wrote the following:

Silence brings
peace amidst chatter
stillness amongst clatter
essence at the end of incessance
space for God's eloquence.

This Lent, may God give us all space for God's eloquence.

Yours in Christ,

Graham Kings

Canon Dr Graham Kings is vicar of St Mary Islington, and theological secretary of Fulcrum.

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¹ Joyce Huggett, *Listening to God* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1986), p. 64. The story by Anthony Bloom is uncited.

² Derek Kidner, *Psalms* (London: IVP, 1975), p. 447-8.

³ Huggett, *Listening to God*, 91.

⁴ Huggett, *Listening to God*, 98.

⁵ 'The Mother Priest', a photo of The Revd Dr Joanne Grenfell and Imogen by Eva-Lotta Jansson, is on <http://www.lottaimage.com/themotherpriest.htm> It was first published in Jansson's article 'The Sisterhood', *The Times Magazine*, 17 December 2005, http://women.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,17909-1935219_1_00.html and was one of the national winners for the UK in the EU's 'For Diversity - Against Discrimination' Journalist Award 2005.

⁶ Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: a Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1962), p. 777

⁷ John V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God: The Holy Spirit and Christian Mission* (London: SCM Press, 1972), p. 229-30.

⁸ John V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God*, p 19 citing Anthony Bloom, *The School of Prayer* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1970), p. 60f.

⁹ Anglican Church of Kenya, *Our Modern Services* (Nairobi: Uzima Press, 2002), p. 15.

¹⁰ Donald Nichol, *Holiness* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1981), p. 69.

¹¹ Henri J. Nouwen, *The Genesee Diary* (Image Books, 1981), p. 14, cited in Huggett, *Listening to God*, 165-6.