

17th May 2020 10am The Heart Attitude to Listening to God

Talk for Knights' Meadow Community Church by Andrew Attwood

Well, good morning Knights' Meadow. It's lovely to be with you today. And it's lovely to be invited to speak to you. Warm greetings from my family. Warm greetings from everyone at Warwick Road St. John's. It's lovely that we can continue to be connected together even during this strange time.

Today's talk is going to be very much in step with what you've already been hearing, focusing on hearing from God.

The particular angle that I'm going to be taking today won't be focusing explicitly on the "how" we get to hear from God, more to do with our heart attitude, to let God speak freely, to let God say anything that he wishes to say to us, so that we can hear everything that he wants to say to us. So that's where we'll be going. I'll be using a few examples from Scripture, and we'll see where we go from there.

So our example today from the Bible is going to be Peter. Peter is the obvious disciple example when it comes to hearing God. And the most famous story to some extent with regards to Peter and obedience is the story of Peter walking on water¹. We won't spend too long on this, but you know it, you know the story very well. Jesus speaks, Jesus invites. And Peter, this extraordinarily brave disciple does the unexpected, he actually steps out onto water and walks on water. I don't think there's anybody else in human history who can make the same claim. And yet we also know that the story concludes with Peter taking his eyes off Jesus, recognising other distractions and beginning to sink. So it's not so straightforward, this business of hearing, it's not so clear-cut. He takes the first step, but he doesn't follow through. And that's one of the clues that I wanted to focus on throughout the rest of this talk. Beginning to hear and then maybe going all the way through to a place where we recognise God really does want to do what he's saying, despite our hesitations, despite our questions, despite our questioning. Peter is a good example of someone who hears, but doesn't always follow all the way through.

But of course, there's another occasion in the Gospel stories where we discover that Peter had a very acute time of disagreement with Jesus. You may remember in Mark's account, chapter 8, verses 31 to 33, Jesus speaks with the twelve and begin to explain to them that he's going to head to Jerusalem, that he's going to be arrested, that he's going to be killed and on the third day he'll rise again. And we see from that piece of Scripture, that Peter is extremely reluctant to hear what Jesus is saying. Indeed, it says "He took him aside." He's effectively telling Jesus off. He's correcting Jesus, because of what he said. Why was Peter so disagreeable? Why was Peter so resistant to what Jesus was saying? Well, in some respects, the answer is obvious. He didn't like it. He didn't like what Jesus was saying. And in response, Jesus ends up actually rebuking Peter. This is where we get the famous, "Get behind me, Satan. You are thinking as men do instead of what God thinks." And Jesus has to be straight with Peter to bring him back into a place of obedience. To hear, even though Peter doesn't want to hear.

I'm aware that there are times in my life where God may say one or two things that are a challenge to me, and I'm reluctant to go with that. There are times in life where we disagree over more trivial things. Lindsey sometimes gets disgruntled with me if I'm hovering around the kitchen, and she's doing the evening meal, and it's not my turn, and she'll say, "Get out, because you're interrupting what I'm doing, you're commenting too much." And I need to kind of shut my mouth and let her do it. To be honest, she cooks better than me anyway.

1 Matthew 14:22-32

But disagreement and struggle with what we sometimes see or hear is an indication of where our heart is at. Is there something in you and I that needs to be addressed with regards to this and it comes to hearing from God?

Of course, there's an even more poignant story in the Gospels to do with Peter. And you'll find it in the 22nd chapter of Luke's account² where Jesus is now at the Last Supper. And he's already shared something of what is going to happen to the whole group. And so there's a level of anxiety building amongst them. But then he turns to Simon again, Simon Peter. And he says "Simon, Satan has desired to sift you. But I've prayed that you'll be strong and that you'll come through." Peter's response is typical: he protests, he resists, he says, "Lord, no, I will go with you all the way, I will go with you to prison, I will go to death. I will follow you all the way." And Jesus probably in a low voice, a quiet voice, says to him, "Peter, you're going to deny me. Before the cock crows even tonight, you will deny me," and you can imagine the bluster and the resistance in Peter's response to that. Yet within hours, that is exactly what happens. This extremely painful picture is, in my view, the clearest portrait of the human race that you will find anywhere. Better than any painting, better than anything written in literature, this exchange, this engagement with Jesus and Peter is the most acute portrait as to how frail we really are. Even someone like Peter, who has been with Jesus for three long years, with the master, with the most loving person for three long years, is still hearing, but not hearing, hearing but reluctant to receive it. And so we get the pained story of Peter later actually denying within hours, denying that he even knows Jesus³. So this reveals quite a lot about who he is, but also maybe quite a lot about who we are. To what extent can we honestly say we're willing to let God say anything to us?

Obviously as you know, I've had all kinds of stuff to reflect upon in the last two, two and a half years. And it's been very revealing, to have to admit to myself that there are times in my own life when I think God probably was trying to say something to me, but I was not really listening. There's a story in Acts⁴ where the first martyr, Stephen, has been arrested. And he's preaching this blistering sermon to the people who have gathered him together for this kind of accusatory, trumped-up kind of trial. And the more he says about their hard-heartedness, the text actually describes them putting their hands over their ears and rushing at him and grabbing him and eventually taking him out to stone him. They were so determined not to hear that they were covering their ears.

When I think back two and a half years to when I had my crash, when I had my breakdown, if I'm honest, on reflection, there were things God was trying to get through to me about. But out of habit, and out of fixed ways of thinking, I just kept doing what I was doing. I kept carrying on with the usual inclinations and the usual patterns of life. And eventually, God allowed circumstances to get my attention properly. He really did get through to me in the end through a whole series of struggles and pains. And I'm glad for it now. In hindsight, I'm really glad that I had to go through that. And now I'm in a better place.

What about you? Are there things that God has tried to say to you but you've ignored it? Are there areas of life or church or ways of being that you ignore quietly because it's just too painful? Are there things that you'd rather just carry on with and that's just a screened-out area that God is not allowed to speak into? I think part of being a Christian is being completely open and honest and giving room to God to say anything he wishes in any area of life. I know that now at a deep and personal level. And I just want to give you space to have a think, just for a couple of minutes now. Are there things, are there

2 Luke 22:31-34

3 Luke 22:54-62

4 Acts 7:54-60

territories, are there subjects, that you are more reluctant to talk to God about, more reluctant to let God speak into? Just give yourselves a minute or two, to have an honest moment of reflection.

[Pause with music]

So is there a happy end with regards to Peter and his ability to hear and obey, his ability to let God speak freely? Well, even skipping beyond the lovely changes that we know from the familiar story of Pentecost where Peter and the rest are filled with the Holy Spirit, and they're given a new intimacy with God and a new boldness for God, skip even further on than that to Acts 10. And you will have the intriguing story of Peter up on the roof, resting and praying, and perhaps reading Scripture, perhaps contemplating something, and he has this vision, this is Acts 10, [verses] 9 to 22. And you have this extraordinary experience given to Peter, where he sees this cloth raised down from heaven to earth in front of him and it contains all kinds of creatures. The creatures, of course, are unclean creatures, creatures that according to the Old Testament covenant, were not to be touched and certainly not eaten by Jewish people, by the people of God. And yet the word that comes with this vision is "Kill and eat." It's interesting. The vision happens three times. He sees this lowering of the cloth three times. He hears three times, "Kill and eat," and he sees three times, "Kill and eat." Even after Pentecost, even after Peter has been filled with the Holy Spirit, even after he's been reconciled to Jesus, and powered by the Spirit, there is still something in Peter that needs to be persuaded out of his cultural comfort zone to do something that he's not familiar with. And on this occasion, Peter gets it right. The penny drops. He hears a knock at the door down below. And he realises that there are some people who are here to see him who are not Jews. They're Gentiles. These are the unclean ones coming to see Peter. And like I say the penny has now dropped. He's heard from God. He's seen the vision. And at the heart level, he is now open to be more responsive. Peter has made progress in his hearing from God, and doing what God says, even when it's difficult.

So in the light of these Bible stories, looking at these different situations, what does it say about our own openness to hearing from God? Ultimately, certainly from my own experience I've found, our willingness to hear from God hinges on the degree to which we know his love, and trust him. If we know the love of God, and we trust God deeply, we're more willing to let him say anything that he wants to say. The more cautious or confused we are about God, the less sure we will be in letting God speak freely.

I know over the last two years, I've had to go through a whole series of changes, discovering, to my surprise, God's desire to communicate his love to me more than I thought. And at first that's been kind of awkward and strange and sometimes difficult to let him keep saying, "I love you, Andrew. I love you, Andrew. I kept you, Andrew." I've had to put myself in a place where in times of stillness in prayer, I've been open to the comforting, compassionate, caring love of God for me, to let that go in. And I've realised that that's softened my heart, that's increased my sense of trust, that God is good. Even though I've read it a thousand times in the Bible, my experience of it now has given me a tenderness here. A tenderness in my heart and in my mind, to let him say more, because I know what he's like.

In addition to that, I think I've also made some progress in the last couple of years, recognising the Lordship of Jesus. So not only do I recognise His love, I think I've grown in recognising His Lordship. When Jesus speaks, if I'm a follower, I need to step into what he's calling me to do. So I'm laying down my own preferences and inclinations a little bit more than I used to. I'm quieter when he tells me to be quiet. I speak when he tells me to speak. So all of this hinges very much on our own personal relationship with God. To what extent do

you know his love? To what extent are you trusting him enough to let him speak completely freely to you about anything he wants to say?

So just a few final comments at this unusual time. There are all kinds of mysteries and questions associated with why the world is in this situation. But one thing that I think is clearer to me is that this is an opportunity for Christians to go deeper with God. I've said this before in other contexts, but I'm going to say it again now. I think there are opportunities here, to dedicate more time to God, to give more room to God, to hear more clearly what he does want to say.

Instead of self-reliance, instead of doing the usual things, our circumstances have changed. Our situation is different and so locked in our homes a little more, we may need to set aside more time. Be still and give God room.

My conclusion is that God wants to say more than we have heard before. God wants to communicate his heart. God wants to build the intimacy that he's longing for others, but also he wants to direct and guide more clearly. There's more that he wants to say.

So I would say this, alongside the various methods and techniques that we can use to help us hear God, I want you to think today about your own heart attitude. Is there something in you that is leaning towards God saying, "Teach me to give you more room to say whatever you want to say"? Is there a desire in you to draw near and to let God speak freely?

Without in mind, let me just pray.

Lord God, at this unusual time, would you take advantage with us, of more opportunity to speak clearly?

Lord, would you help us as individuals and as churches to give you more room to say whatever you want to say?

Lord Jesus, we recognise the vacillating, changing story of Peter, who is a good example to us. He eventually arrived at a place of obedience, willingness to hear new things. Help us, like Peter, to go on a journey of discovering how to let you speak more freely.

And I pray that we would discover your voice, particularly in these next days and weeks.

In Jesus' Name we pray,
Amen.

God bless you all.

[Transcribed by <https://otter.ai> with help from Hamish Blair]