

John 10:27 – Listening to the voice of Jesus

(Reading – John 10:14-33)

My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. (John 10:27)

Introduction

In our series on the vital subject of prayer, we are looking this evening at the subject of listening to God.

Prayer is all about communion with God. At the beginning of Genesis we read of the Lord God walking in the Garden in the cool of the day seeking fellowship and conversation with the man and the woman. Prayer is the enjoyment of God's company and conversation with him to the maximum extent that fallen but redeemed human beings can enjoy such communion this side of glory. It is the Christian's great privilege, necessity and blessing.

And such conversation with the living God is not one-sided. It is not merely us insistently and incessantly talking with God whether in thanksgiving and praise or in demanding things from him. The life of prayer also involves listening to God.

I want to look at this theme particularly in the light of Jesus' words recorded in John 10:27: "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me." As Christians we not only bear the name of Christ, we profess to be followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, listening to him and following him. What does this mean?

Jesus' words in Context

Jesus' ministry provoked very different responses. There were the crowds who heard him gladly but who, as we discover at the end of John 6, could easily misunderstand his teaching or even take offence and drift away. These fickle crowds could one minute be welcoming Jesus as he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey but could, within a few days, be crying out for him to be crucified.

Then there were the Jewish leaders, the Pharisees whom Jesus is addressing in the passage we read this evening. They had no time for Jesus and listened to him only to argue with him and to oppose him.

But there were also his disciples. They had heard the call of the Lord Jesus to follow him and had left everything that had previously been important to them to be with Jesus, to listen to him, to learn from him and to join him in his mission.

In the passage we read from John 10, Jesus paints a dramatic picture of the contrast between himself and the Jewish leaders. He is the good shepherd who has come to gather together a flock who will be under his care and keeping – unlike the shepherds who have exploited and ravaged the flock. He is the one who will lay down his life for the sheep.

And Jesus also paints a dramatic picture of the contrast between the Jewish leaders and those who are his followers – his flock. "I know my sheep and my sheep know me", he says (10:14). You Jewish leaders may reject me and even accuse me of being demon possessed but my followers know me and I know them. You do not believe in me, you do not recognise who I am, and so you show that you are not my sheep. In contrast:

My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. (John 10:27-29)

These are wonderful words. Not only do they describe the character of his disciples – they hear the voice of Jesus and follow him – they also describe the blessings which belong to those who follow him: they will never perish and nothing in life or in death will be able to separate them from the love of God that has embraced them in the Lord Jesus Christ. Here is a love that is beyond our comprehension now, but which we shall enjoy throughout all eternity.

What do Jesus' words imply for us?

Jesus has described his disciples in these words: "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me." What do these words mean for us?

We are those who have heard the call of Christ. We have heard and responded; we have committed ourselves to following him. Jesus here reminds us that we need to go on listening to his voice and following him. "My sheep", he says, "listen to my voice." "Listen" is present tense, they go on listening and go on following. The call of Christ upon our lives is not a one-off call, it is a continuous call for us to listen, learn and follow.

One of Jesus' favourite phrases in his teaching of the crowds was to challenge them to have ears that were ready to hear. In Mark 4, at the end of the parable of the sower Jesus says, "Whoever has ears, let him hear." And the parable itself underlines the need for us not only to listen to the initial call of Jesus to follow him but to go on listening and following: go on listening and following when trouble and difficulties come our way; go on listening and following in the business of daily life, with the demands of work and family; go on listening, following and bearing fruit.

Again, when we read what Jesus has to say to the churches in Revelation chapters 2 and 3, the risen Christ challenges us with the call, "Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

We need to be a people who are constantly attentive to the voice of our Saviour who calls us on to follow him and live for him.

How do we listen to the voice of God – the voice of Jesus Christ, the voice of the Spirit?

I don't profess to being an expert on this matter. I confess that all too often I fail to listen to the voice of Christ as I should, either because of business with other things that clamour for my attention and drown out the call of Christ, or sometimes by deliberately turning a deaf ear to his call. So I am not telling you that this is how I do it: "Listen to my advice and be like me." Rather I am speaking to myself along with you and seeking to encourage us each one and as a church to listen and learn of Christ and to follow him.

On Thursday I was working in the kitchen and Liz was telling me what to do. I replied, "I hear what you say." She responded by saying that she hates that phrase. All too often in her work as a midwife people had used that phrase to her, "I hear what you say", before going on to ignore what she said. We must not do that with the Lord. We need to listen to him, hear what he says to us and act upon it.

1. Careful meditation upon Scripture

I believe that the first means of hearing the voice of God and the call of Christ, the first means of being attentive to what the Spirit is saying to us is through the careful reading and consideration of Scripture.

God reveals himself to us in a variety of ways. We see much of his glory displayed to us in creation. But he reveals himself most clearly to us, showing us his character and his will for us, through his word – his word written and recorded in Scripture and supremely through the word incarnate in the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ himself is revealed to us in all the glory of his character and in the insistence of his call through the pages of the New Testament and particularly the Gospel accounts of those who were his first disciples. It is as we read these Scriptures and these accounts of Christ – not reading in a cursory or formal manner but with attentiveness to what they are saying that we hear the call of Christ. It is as we accompany our reading of Scripture with heartfelt prayer and an attentive mind that the Spirit applies these Scriptures to our hearts and moulds our minds to understand the will of God and hear the call of Christ.

It is as we read the Scriptures, and especially the Gospel accounts that we get to know Christ and to love him. And the more we know him and love him and gain an understanding of his character, the better we will be able to discern what God is saying to us through his word and by his Spirit.

This is not always easy. Some passages are difficult to understand. Sometimes Jesus makes demands on those who ask to follow him which will leave us asking, "Does he demand this of me? And if not, what does he call me to be and to do in following him?" I frequently wrestle with such questions in seeking to gain a clearer understanding of the Saviour's call upon my life. It is not easy, but we need to read the Gospels frequently; and read them with the intention and desire of hearing the voice of Christ and following him.

2. By listening to preaching of the word

God often speaks to us as we meet together to hear his word preached or to study his word together in groups. We need to come with an expectant spirit ready to hear what the Spirit is saying to us as a church and also to hear what the Spirit is saying to each one of us as individuals.

Let me give you an example. A few weeks ago Nigel was preaching on Intercession as part of our series on Prayer. He spoke of persistent prayer for those who have not yet come to know Christ. He said that the great evangelist D L Moody had a list of 100 people who were not Christians for whom he prayed every day. By the time of his death, 96 out of the 100 had come to know Christ and the remaining 4 came to own Christ as Lord at Moody's funeral.

While Nigel was speaking I became more and more convinced that the Lord was speaking to me. We pray for many people on our weekly prayer list, including relatives who do not yet know Christ. Those closest to us are often the ones whom we find it most difficult to talk to about issues of life and death and their standing with God. I was conscious that on the following day we were going to be visiting an older relative who is terminally ill with cancer. I became increasingly aware that Christ was telling me to talk to her about these things and that a failure to talk to her would be to ignore the call of Christ.

I won't tell you the long version of the story but suffice it to say that we visited her on the way back from a wonderful funeral of a faithful Christian, a funeral full of thankfulness and hope. This gave me the opening to talk to our relative about her death and to urge her to trust in Christ who had broken death's power.

Now I tell this story not so that you may admire me as an evangelist – I am all too aware of my failings in this area – but to highlight how we may hear the voice of God and the call of Christ when we listen to the word preach. We need to listen with attentive ears; listen not to judge the quality of the preaching or the length of the message but to hear what Christ has to say to us and to follow his call.

3. Through conversation with fellow Christians

It is all too easy for us to deceive ourselves concerning the call of Christ. We need one another that we might be able to hear together what Christ is saying to us.

Talk with one another. Pray with one another. Listen to one another. Seek to listen to the voice of Christ through the counsel of fellow believers. Be open to the voice of the Spirit.

4. Through quiet contemplation

Contemplation has been the focus of a previous week in our course on Prayer and I don't intend to go over it all again. But I believe that the better we know Christ through his word and by his Spirit, the more clearly we will hear his voice when we spend time in quiet contemplation. It might be sitting quietly and focussing our minds on a verse of Scripture or on some aspect of God's character. It might be walking in the countryside and observing the beauty of his creation or looking at the beauty and intricacy of a flower. It might be looking at a painting or some other work of art. In the quietness of your heart, be ready to hear what Christ is saying to you – to hear his voice and follow him.

5. In the ordinary business our daily lives

We should not think that Christ speaks to us only when we quietly wait on him. Christ can talk to us in the midst of the business of our daily lives and sometimes precisely through that business.

In his book, *The Life You've Always Wanted* (pp. 155-156), John Ortberg tells how he had one day lost what he calls his "Day-Timer", a notebook similar to what we know as a "filofax" – containing

his diary, contacts and other notes. He had lost it by leaving it on the roof of his car and then driving off down a main road. He relied on this "Day-Timer" to manage his day and know where he should be when. As he was driving he realised he hadn't got it and suddenly remembered having left it on the roof of his car. He turned back to try and find it and did find a part containing his contacts on the side of the road about a mile back from where he had stopped and turned round. The diary and rest of the notebook were nowhere to be found.

As he was searching around in a state of increasing desperation, a car suddenly swerved over and stopped by him. A woman opened her window and placed his "Day-Timer" in his hand. She told him, "I found this here. I got a few blocks away and I got this impression that I should drive back here and look for the owner. This may sound strange, but I'm a Christian and I believe that thought came from God, from the Holy Spirit. Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?"

What a challenge. Do we believe in the Holy Spirit and in his power to speak into our lives with the voice of God? Are we open to what he has to say to us in the mundane things of life as well as the big spiritual issues?

In conclusion

Be open to the call of Christ and eager to listen to his call and to respond by following him. Like Mary (of Mary and Martha) be keen to sit at the Master's feet and listen to him – to be a disciple.

Be careful how you listen, that you may not mistake other voices as the voice of the Saviour or think that he is speaking when it is only the echo of your own desires. Take counsel and pray with others.

Remember that Christ's call is pre-eminently to follow him, learn of him and grow in our likeness to him. Far more important than recovering lost items is to recover the lost image of God for which we were created. He calls us to lives abounding in the fruit of the Spirit – lives marked by "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." And he calls us to follow him in the work of the kingdom. This is his primary call on our lives.

It is vital that we always have an open ear to the voice of the Saviour.

Cecil Frances Alexander, who wrote many well-known and well-loved hymns such as *There is a Green Hill Far Away* and *All things bright and beautiful* also wrote the following hymn about the call of Christ and it is with this, with its quaint language but enduring relevance, that I end:

Jesus calls us o'er the tumult
of our life's wild, restless sea;
day by day his sweet voice soundeth,
saying "Christian, follow me."

As, of old, apostles heard it
by the Galilean lake,
turned from home and toil and kindred,
leaving all for his dear sake.

Jesus calls us from the worship
of the vain world's golden store,
from each idol that would keep us,
saying "Christian, love me more."

In our joys and in our sorrows,
days of toil and hours of ease,
still he calls, in cares and pleasures,
"Christian, love me more than these."

Jesus calls us; by thy mercies,
Saviour, may we hear thy call,
give our hearts to thine obedience,
serve and love thee best of all.

Peter Misselbrook

Christ Church Downend – 16/2/2020: 6.30