

READING

Acts 15:5-20

SERMON

A Beginner's Guide

Imagine the scene. There I was at a conference of ministers. This was an annual event and the year before was the first year that spouses were also invited to attend if they wanted. Sue came the first year, but was unable to come the second year due to work commitments. On the second day, at lunchtime I heard from behind me, "Richard!" So I turned to look for Sue because it was Sue's voice. What was Sue doing here? Had she got time off to come? So I turned in the direction of the sound of her voice, but did not see her. I wondered if someone tall was standing in front of her, or was I imagining the sound of her voice because I was missing her so much! So I turned back, still in the queue for lunch.

Then, again, I heard, "Richard, Richard!" A little more strident this time, so I swivelled round, last time I turned, this time I swivelled. Where was Sue? No where to be seen. Then as I was turned around a lady I knew to be the wife of another minister called Richard, called out "Richard." The mystery was solved as she was calling her husband but the odd thing was that her voice calling her husband sounded just like my Sue when she calls my name. All the way through the conference I had to switch off to the sound of my name when called by the other Richard's wife – it was great training for when I came home!

But how do we recognise someone's voice. Some people are surprised when you recognise them on the phone. "Do I sound that distinctive?" they sometimes ask. Some people are confused on the phone. I often confuse my brother-in-law and his son – they sound so similar.

So when it comes to the voice of God in our lives, how do we know it? How do we recognise it? Or are we always like Samuel whom God called three times and Samuel thought that it was Eli calling him. Then Eli said to Samuel

"...Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'"..." (1 Samuel 3:9 NIV)

Samuel had yet to recognise the voice of God, but later in his life we read

"When Jesse's sons arrived, Samuel saw Eliab and thought, "Surely the LORD's anointed stands here before the LORD." But the LORD said to Samuel, 'Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.'" Then Jesse called Abinadab and made him pass in front of Samuel. But Samuel said, "The LORD has not chosen this one either." Jesse then made Shammah pass by, but Samuel said, "Nor has the LORD chosen this one." Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, but Samuel said to him, "The LORD has not chosen these." So he asked Jesse, "Are these all the sons you have?" "There is still the youngest," Jesse answered, "but he is tending the sheep." Samuel said, "Send for him; we will not sit down until he arrives." So he sent and had him brought in. He was ruddy, with a fine appearance and handsome features. Then the LORD said, "Rise and anoint him; he is the one." So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the LORD came upon David in power. Samuel then went to Ramah." (1 Samuel 16:6-13 NIV)

Samuel certainly knew the voice of God when he came to anointing David as king of Israel and not anointing any of his brothers, even though they seemed to be worthy of the role.

So how do we, as beginners, get to know the voice of God, to recognise what God is saying to us rather than ungodly voices that give ungodly guidance? There is ungodly guidance around as Paul found out in the city of Philippi where we read

“Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling.” (Acts 16:16 NIV)

Or as Philip found out

“Now for some time a man named Simon had practised sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great, and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, “This man is the divine power known as the Great Power.” They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his magic.” (Acts 8:9-11 NIV)

Both were giving ungodly guidance which still goes on today. Beware of ungodly guidance.

So how do we make sure that we hear the voice of God and not take some ungodly voice? Let us turn to Acts 15, the reading we had earlier. Which voice should be heard, that of the Pharisees, or that of Peter and Paul? The reason for the dispute is not important to what we are looking at today. It is the way in which they reach the result – how they heard the voice of God, how they were guided. And we have to remember that the church was very young at this point and that they were still learning.

So how did they hear the voice of God?

Reading the Bible – the best way is to read the Bible. That way you get to know about God. It is best to do this with a system using some notes which explain the passage you have just read and fit it into the larger picture of the Bible. Verse 15

“The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: “After this I will return and rebuild David’s fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things’ that have been known for ages.” (Acts 15:15-18 NIV)

One thing they did was that they looked at what the Bible said on the subject under discussion.

One obvious thing is to get to know God. It is like getting to know anyone’s voice, if you get to know them when they ring up and say “it’s me” you know who me is.

So beginning with the Bible is a great place to begin. The disciples must have known their way around the Bible to be able to find the part they were looking for. It is not so easy to turn to a part of scroll and find the verse or verses you want. However this takes time, this takes work to learn, this takes time to remember and we tend to live in a instant culture that wants instant answers and instant knowledge. But it does not happen like that – even in real life.

This year we celebrate a milestone birthday in Sue's family. We are getting together as a family, all twelve of us over a weekend. Over the weekend we will be do doubt reminiscing, finding out about each other and about members of the immediate family and extended family who are no longer with us. We will listen and learn. Even after knowing Sue and her family for nearly 40 years now, I still am learning things.

It is the same with God. We need to learn about God, get to know God more, from his word.

- How God dealt with his people.
- How God the Son came to save each of us because of love.
- How Jesus lived when he was on earth.

All these things help us to get to know God better

Listen to Others – But the people in Acts 15, trying to sort out the dispute also listened to Paul and to Peter and I do love verse 12

“The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.” (Acts 15:12 NIV)

The whole assembly became silent – they were really listening. At times you may have a decision and are not quite sure what to do. Maybe you have felt that God has spoken to you, or someone has even given you a prophecy and you want to test it out.

The Bible is the best place to begin. Is what is being said in line with what the Bible says? Some things are a no-brainer because if you think God is saying to go a murder someone, you know from Scripture that it is wrong.

However you can still be undecided, so we need to seek out some friends, good Christian friends and have a talk with them about it and pray together – that is important. I can remember going to one man, Philip several times for advice. I wanted to hear what God was saying on something, but being a young Christian I was having problems. I explained to Philip my situation and the decision I needed to make. Then Philip said, “Let us pray about the situation.” So we did and it was after we had prayed that Philip then began to give insights into the situation.

This is the sort of Christian friend one wants, Philip was more mature than me in Christian matters and he always put God first.

The danger is that we can go from person to person until we get the answer we really wanted in the first place. Always chose a close circle of wise people to ask. Never ask too many or else one can become confused.

Common Sense - And finally they used common sense. Verse 19

“It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.” (Acts 15:19 NIV)

The Bible had been looked at, advice had been listened to, and then **my judgement** was used. Not in going against the Bible or advice, but in making sense of it all and finally in the actions taken which was the sensible course.

So what about us? What can we learn from this? Firstly that the discussion that day did not have a miraculous word from God – not many of our decisions need that.

- They did not have a burning bush experience – very few of our decisions need that.

- They did not have to bargain with God – if this happens then I will do that.

They used the Bible, advice and common sense. That is not to rule out the miraculous – like God speaking directly to Samuel, that can happen today, but we should not expect it all the time. For the early church, they made their decision, a right decision and then moved on, they carried on living.

That is what God calls us to do, but how? There is a verse that always keeps coming back to me at times like this, Philippians 1:27

“Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ...” (Philippians 1:27 NIV)

That is the true direction of our lives – to conduct ourselves in a worthy manner of the gospel of Christ and we can only do that as we know God better and look to deepen our relationship with him rather than always trying to seek what his will is for us.

PRAYER