



**Sermon preached by Penny Flynn on 12th January 2025**

**Readings: Psalm 29; Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22**

***Epiphany II***

The Voice of God. - So powerful in that psalm. Terrifying, if one was to relate each verse to life even in today's world. God's voice – over the waters, thundering – think of the volume! – think of storms at sea. God's voice is powerful and full of majesty – it should inspire awe, trepidation – make one feel so, so small and helpless. God's voice breaks the cedars and oaks by the wind it creates, and strips the forests bare. God's voice shakes the wilderness. I've never experienced even a small earth- tremor, let alone an earthquake; perhaps someone here has. Oh dear – and yet the psalmist writes: 'in God's temple all say 'Glory!' Wow!

(there followed a quote from Ron Dale, 1999, in which the author wrote about the importance of words and how language has lost much of its former power. Words can change the world, for good or ill. Human, Christian beings, made in God's image, have the use of words as one of God's gifts. Just as when God speaks, new worlds emerge, so it is with human-beings. This was related to the awesome power of words and language.)

But God's voice is so very prominent in *all* the bible passages we've heard today, isn't it?

So I think I was caught up in what John H. Hayes calls 'the emotional impact' of these verses of the psalm; 'an emotion focussed upon God and the divine voice.' The words conjured up images: for example, we were in Northumberland last year, and our friend drove us past areas of forest destruction brought about by Storm Arwen, 3 or 4 years ago – it was amazing to see how the winds had roared through leaving a path of fallen trees rather river-like across the hillsides. John Hayes also suggests that the hearer of the psalm, and the listener to the account of Jesus' baptism, is not asked to become part of the scene or a participant in the account. The significance of the action asks that the worshipper simply affirms what has been said and then lives in the certainty of what has been affirmed.' You may have your own thoughts about that.

- Through the Psalm we hear God's voice as at the Creation-tide, powerful, strong, chaotic, terrifying, and yet having the response of 'Glory'!
- Through Isaiah, we hear God's voice as one bringing comfort and reassurance in times of trouble.
- Through Luke's gospel, we hear God's voice as one affirming his Son, as only a loving Father can.

Within the psalm and the gospel reading, there are open heavens, there's quite a lot of water, and there's God's voice – all running through the words as powerful forces. But the difference also is noticeable – where the one speaks of nature's might, way beyond us, something to be witnessed and awesome, the other is personal, close and intimate.

Then there are the wonderful words of Isaiah – the calm reassurance of God's presence through thick and thin, of redemption, restoration, protection and comfort – for a people who had strayed and gone their own way. We know that in Christian life, whilst God promises to protect and watch over, there is no promise of an easy, trouble-free life; but we also know that whatever occurs, God is with us. Do not fear.

In Isaiah *and* the story of Jesus' baptism, there's the important significance of the name, of that personal relationship. Jesus is told 'You are my Son, the beloved.' God's people are told, 'I have called you by your name; you are mine.'

Isaiah reminds the people that it was the Lord who created them, who formed them – who redeemed them. And a new redemption was coming – redemption from captivity in Babylon; this passage is God reminding God's people who he is, what he has done for his people Israel, what he is doing

now – and it ends with a repetition: verse 7 ‘everyone who is called by name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.’ How precious are God’s people to God.

Have *you* heard God’s voice? I daresay you have. Most likely not through a prophet such as Isaiah; most likely not as Jesus did, directly whilst others could also hear – surely that *was* for Jesus’ benefit, to reassure him that his time had come, his work, that for which he was born, should begin; but surely also for the benefit of those present so there could be no doubt and they would know that Jesus was the One, the long-promised Messiah for whom they had been waiting. The One who John the Baptist said would come after him, whose sandals he was not worthy to carry, or which things he was not worthy to untie, and who would himself baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire; the One of whom John said, “I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.” (John 1:34).

“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well-pleased.”

No, we are less-likely to hear God as directly in that way, but more likely through another person – yes, God speaks to us through others, even if they aren’t aware, and if we aren’t aware at the time. It is often as we reflect back and join the dots that we realise God has been speaking, calling, challenging, asking, telling, affirming. Sometimes we don’t hear because we are resistant to the words. Fortunately God is patient and tries again and again.

Some say humans are finding it harder to hear God’s voice because of the cacophony of daily life, which will be different for us all. So many sounds all around, competing for our attention, or just irritatingly in the background. Yet when we are familiar with a particular sound – maybe the voice of one close to us or who we know well – that voice can penetrate the rest, break through to our consciousness and make itself heard. According to Revelation chapter 3 verse 20, Jesus said, “Listen! I am standing at the door knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you and you with me.” There’s a word there that is crucial to hearing the voice of God – LISTEN! Sometimes used as a way to get attention, as a teacher to their class: ‘Listen everyone....’ For hearing God’s voice, it is an obvious pre-requisite, a deliberate act, involving making space and time in the best possible circumstances – removing ourselves from that cacophony of life, focussing on God.

Of course, some don’t like what they hear. Think of Jonah in the bible – he heard well and truly, but ran away, tried to hide from God, because he didn’t want to do what God told him to. And even the great Moses initially struggled with what he heard – Moses, quite reasonably we might think, asked a lot of questions – what if this? what if that? And God, also quite reasonably, answered them all, possibly becoming a bit less patient by the time of his penultimate question about not being eloquent enough to speak to the Pharaoh. ‘Then the Lord said to (Moses) - ‘Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go....’ But Moses tried one more time to wriggle out of this enormous task: ‘O, my Lord, please send someone else.’ Then the anger of the Lord was kindled. But he did send Moses’ brother as a back-up.... The Lord is gracious.

Many years ago, before we came to live in Cambridge, we had a friend in our house group who was terrified. She was sure the Lord was calling her to live a holy, secluded life – perhaps become a nun – and she really didn’t want to. It was something we talked about a great deal; she was fearful of that calling. We don’t know if she did or did not truly discern God’s voice in that – I hope, with time, she either had the calling confirmed and was enabled to fulfil it, or that she learned that it was perhaps not God’s voice calling her to that particular vocation. We have no way of knowing now. Maybe Mother Teresa must have found herself in a similar situation, as she’s reported to have said, “I know God will not give me anything I can’t handle. I just wish that he didn’t trust me so much.”

But of course, God’s voice is heard in many ways. I don’t know how Abraham Lincoln heard from God, but apparently he said, “I have discovered that when the Almighty wants me to do or not do a particular thing, he has a way of letting me know.” \* I think the great prophet Elijah discovered that, on the mountain. It’s one of my favourite bible stories. 1 Kings chapter 19: ‘Then the word of the

Lord came to him, saying, ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’ And Elijah told the Lord how terrified he was, seemingly the only person left who was faithful to God, and fearing for his life. And he was told to go and stand on the mountain before the Lord – and we know the Lord was not in the great wind, and the Lord was not in the earthquake, and the Lord was not in the fire – all those things the Voice of God causes as in the Psalm (29) – but no – Elijah heard the Lord in the sound of sheer silence ..... not something we, in this city of Cambridge, in the western world, get to experience very often, is it? Sheer silence. And into that silence, the voice asked him again, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” and he gave the same reply as he had before. Was he then comforted? Reassured that all would be well? Given a sense of peace and of a job well-done? Well, no, actually. He was sent on his way with a set of new tasks. But perhaps that gave him a new focus – took away his fear for himself, giving him a sense of purpose once again as he served his Lord.

Last week, in *Sharing Together*, Nigel invited members of the congregation to say what God does for us. No-one said ‘God loves us’. I was about to – and no doubt others thought it too – but I was too late! These readings make that fact very clear though, don’t they. Without love, God might not have created the earth and everything in it, and humans in God’s likeness – and all through the power of God’s voice. Without love for the people God had chosen, God might not have called them back to himself, clearing the obstacles ahead of them, and calling them by name. And without love for all people, everywhere, God might not have sent his Son, His Beloved, with whom God was well-pleased. God’s voice, commanding, calling, naming, loving.

I don’t think God’s voice is only about words. God’s voice is heard through the gestures of others – through personal feelings – in visions – in what is seen in creation – And God makes his voice ‘heard’ to each one as he knows is best for them. Oh, and I haven’t mentioned prayer! In this case, perhaps, the prayer in which one says to God: ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening’ – as the boy Samuel was directed when he first came to know the Lord. Or you might prefer to say, ‘Speak, Lord – I am here – please help me to listen – to your voice, however you want me to hear – through reading your word, through ‘hearing’ what you say to me through others – through the natural world I observe – just help me to be open, to you.’ Amen.

I end with a prayer written by Susan Durber for today, entitled ‘A heartfelt cry’

God, let me tell you now  
that I have always longed  
to find myself beloved,  
to know that someone  
is well pleased with me.  
I know the shame of being despised,  
the loneliness of being invisible,  
the ache of hating myself.  
When I am praying,  
I want the heavens to open  
and a voice to tell me  
I am beloved.

So, let me stand with Jesus  
and may he stand with me,  
so that I may also know  
that I am beloved of you.

And then I could stand with all the unloved  
and tell them of this love of yours  
And let your Spirit fall .... Amen.

[*URC Prayer Handbook 2025 p.9*]

\*[*from ‘A Bundle of Laughs’ by J. John and Mark Stibbe p.87*]

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