

Practice makes perfect

Richard Dawson 1 September 2013

John 15¹⁻⁸ / Ecclesiastes 4⁹⁻¹²

Hearing God is mystery because God is mystery. God is so much more than we can comprehend that He must be mystery to us. But we also know that God desires relationship with us and is able to come down to our level. In Christ God reaches out to us in a manner we can understand and relate to. We know this because of the myriad of testimonies, old and new, of Christ speaking into the lives of people in such practical and life giving ways.

And God speaks in precisely these practical ways. He speaks into our everyday life. He speaks about everyday things and everyday problems and issues and we should remember that He cares for the detail of our lives.

We celebrated this week the 50th anniversary of the famous 'I have a dream speech...' of Martin Luther King. It was a speech which finally provided the momentum for the American nation to begin pulling down the walls of racism. What isn't so well known is the great battle King had to get to that moment. It was his faith which enabled him to get to this moment. In his book *Welcoming Justice*, Charles Marsh describes one of King's profound encounters with the Risen Christ.

[In January 1956, Martin Luther King Jr.] returned home around midnight after a long day of organizational meetings. His wife and young daughter were already in bed, and King was eager to join them. But a threatening call—the kind of call he was getting as many as 30 to 40 times a day—interrupted his attempt to get some much-needed rest. When he tried to go back to bed, he could not shake the menacing voice that kept repeating the hateful words in his head.

King got up, made a pot of coffee, and sat down at his kitchen table. With his head buried in his hands, he cried out to God. There in his kitchen in the middle of the night, when he had come to the end of strength, King met the living Christ in an experience that would carry him through the remainder of his life. "I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on," King later recalled. "He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone ... He promised never to leave me, no never alone."

In the stillness of the Alabama night, the voice of Jesus proved more convincing than the threatening voice of the anonymous caller. The voice of Jesus gave him the courage to press through the tumultuous year of 1956 to the victorious end of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. More than that, it gave him a vision for ministry that would drive him for the rest of his life. God knew what he needed in that moment. He knew what word was required and He provided that special word.

A number of years ago, a missionary family was in the Dominican Republic. If you've ever driven in a developing

country, you know how dangerous the traffic can be. Vehicles whiz past, coming within just a few feet of children playing close to the road. One night, the son Sam was playing a game in his own little world, in which he would zig and zag, back and forth from sidewalk onto the narrow street and back. It wasn't a heavily travelled road; but there was always loud music blaring, and it was pitch dark. From about 10 feet away, Sam's father suddenly shouted, "Samuel, don't move!" Immediately he froze. About a second later a Moped zipped past him, going 30 mph with no lights on—right where Sam was about to step. Sam heard his father and obeyed instantly – a move which in all likelihood saved his life.

Sam was fortunate he recognised his father's voice. How do we learn to recognise God's voice? How do we learn to hear God?

In learning anything there are usually three stages I go through. The first is the start. Making a start is often the most difficult stage especially if I'm down on motivation. Getting that initial momentum into something requires a real kick and that can come from a variety of places. Often that kick isn't present unless I've recently been stung by some mistake or lack or a real sense of missing out. It may come from a new awareness of what I need or of what can be gained wherever it comes from we need to take advantage of the moment and get on with it. The point is, at some stage the first step has to be taken; we have to get on with it; we have

to face the pain of what is ahead of us. When I first began to learn piano I took to it with enormous gusto and enthusiasm but it was long before that half an hour of practice became excruciating for me. Just to put down my book or come inside or stop whatever I was doing and begin that practice was a huge issue and yet if I could be seated, if I could get that first scale out, I soon forgot what I was leaving behind.

The second stage is what I would call the disillusionment stage. It's where practice does not produce obvious progress and it's often where I give up. I've been working on something for say a week or two and nothing changes and I look back at all that time with no apparent reward and I can't see one good thing for it. This is perhaps the hardest stage of learning. It's when we are most tempted to give up and it's usually when we need one of two things. 1. We need a mentor or coach to let us know that we are making progress even if we can't see it yet or 2. We need a greater goal – an aim, a vision of the future which can help us keep going through this difficult patch. A mentor is worth their weight in gold at this point because they have both an objective view of what's going on and they can provide tangible encouragement for us when we most need it.

There's a wonderful passage in Ecclesiastes which is often read at weddings actually but which applies equally well to the coach/mentor situation and it goes like this...

⁹Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. ¹⁰For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. ¹¹Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? ¹²And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken. (Eccles 4)

There is a strong tradition of such coach in Christianity but we have left this behind somewhat. It is thankfully beginning to revive and it is a wonderful resource when we are trying to seek God. **(Spiritual Direction testimony – Colin Fitzpatrick)**

The third stage is the reward stage. Something has changed. We recognise a win – perhaps just a small one – but we recognise it all the same. Now this stage can also be difficult because if the win is just a small one we may be tempted to look back on all the work and say to ourselves – it wasn't worth it. I've worked so hard and yes, I've got a win but it's so small I don't know if it's all going to be worth it.

What's required at this stage isn't so much something different as something with a longer view. We need a goal – something clear we're heading for. If you watch Bill explaining how he set out to practice the presence of God he mentions that goal quite clearly – he wanted to experience that

presence. He wanted to be able to know God in his everyday life and be able to relate well to God. [Play video 1.00 – 3.25m]

In music the goal was to master the piece – to actually be able to play the whole thing through and it helped if you enjoyed the piece to begin with. Often this was quite a long term goal – It might take 6 – 8 weeks to master a piece and, of course, by the time you'd done it you were sick of the piece – you desperately wanted to play something else. And yet, this was an accomplishment. It was something achieved, something finalised.

Now two things can happen at this point. Either you can feel as if you've conquered that and now you want to try your hand at something new or you can decide to move on a step and to improve your game in this area. The second choice is always the more difficult and more productive because you know that taking that step up involves revisiting the same cycle you've just completed – making a start, enduring the mundane where you don't seem to be improving and, finally, gaining a win or some sort. This is the path less travelled friends and it's the path we learn more about in the next section of the whisper series. Can I encourage you this morning to take that path when it comes to hearing God and developing a much closer relationship with God. I want to invite Lynne Baab to share a little about her journey in this area.