

**Acts of the Apostles 8:26-40,  
John 5:19-23****Introduction**

In my last sermon I looked at the ministry and witness of the apostles and we saw that their ability to minister so effectively came from the Holy Spirit's anointing. As we read through the Acts of the Apostles, which really should be called "The acts of the Holy Spirit", we come across many examples of the apostles hearing God speaking to them and when they obey his instructions working powerfully in their lives and through them to others.

The epistle reading starts, "An angel of the Lord said to Philip", half way through the story we read, "The Holy Spirit said to Philip". We see in this account of Philip's witness to the Ethiopian Eunuch a clear example of a disciple working in co-operation with God. God had his plans and purposes for the Ethiopian Official and so he told Philip to go to a place where he might meet him and when he got there he told Philip to go up to the carriage. The direct instructions finish there but in the way Philip speaks to the man we see an example of what we call "words of wisdom". Philip knew exactly what to say to the man in order to reveal his need so that he could witness to him through the power of the Holy Spirit and bring him to faith.

Our problem, when we read passages like this, is we can find ourselves unable to relate to it. Many of us are unsure what it means to hear God speaking to us and have certainly never had directions to go to the M11 roundabout and prepare ourselves to minister to somebody. Yet we see the apostles hearing God speaking to them and obeying him with spectacular results, and Jesus' whole ministry was carried out in co-operation with God the Father. Jesus told the disciples "*the Son can do nothing on his own; he does only what he sees the Father doing. What the Father does, the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing*" John 5:19f So how can we hear God speaking to us? How can we see what he is doing so that we can co-operate with him.

I remember when I first started asking God to fill me with his Spirit so that I could live and witness more effectively I got very frustrated. I wasn't sure how to hear God's voice and when I thought I heard it didn't trust my instincts. My problem was that as a child, for various reasons, I had got used to suppressing my feelings and emotions. If I felt or thought something I usually ignored it and did or said what I thought those around me wanted me to do. The result was that when I tried to hear God talking to me through my thoughts or feelings I found it very hard to listen.

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Then, about 30 years ago, I was at a conference where everyone else seemed to be hearing God speaking and responding to the Spirit, yet I felt left out and that I was missing something important. Finally in despair I remember saying to God, "Well if you want me to hear your voice you are going to have to shout very loud, because I just cannot hear you" That was in the morning, that evening during the worship time God's Spirit just came down on me. I felt myself absolutely surrounded by God's love and clearly heard him tell me that he loved me very much. That was something I very badly needed to hear and having once heard God's voice I began to be able to recognise when he was speaking to me. I even got the courage to respond to the things I heard him say, and gradually, as I built up confidence that God would speak and that I would be able to hear I found more and more, that he was speaking to me, directing my actions and giving me the wisdom and help to minister to others.

### **But How do I know when God is speaking to me?**

Good question. It is something that we learn to recognise as we test it.

#### **1. Be expectant.**

God wants to communicate with us so when thoughts or feelings pop into your minds, especially if they are unexpected, get used to asking yourself if this is God's voice. We need to get used to asking ourselves the question because so many of us rarely expect to hear God speaking to us on a daily and regular basis. Yet, if we are listening and expectant, and at least asking the question we will have more opportunity to hear God speaking.

#### **2. Test it out.**

a) Is it consistent with what I know of God's character and working? This doesn't mean that it might not be unusual or initially strange. God sometimes speaks and acts in unexpected ways. Jesus spat on the ground and rubbed mud into people's eyes, not necessarily usual behaviour but clearly in step with what God is doing. Just because something you think seems slightly unusual doesn't mean it isn't God speaking. Check it out.

b) Is it consistent with scripture? ( it could actually be a scripture verse as God often speaks directly through his word) When God speaks to us it will **never** be to tell us something that is contradicted in scripture. So if you feel you are being told to do something sinful, or something that will hurt others or is contrary to what we have learned in the Bible it is not God speaking to us. The apostle James says this: (James 3:17) *"The wisdom from above is pure first of all; it is also peaceful, gentle and friendly; it is full of compassion and produces a harvest of good deeds; it is free from prejudice and hypocrisy."* Accusing, angry or guilty thoughts are not from God and are much more likely to be from our own damaged past or the devil trying to accuse us.

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**3. Act upon it.** (Unless it is illegal or dangerous to do so)

If it is an action - phone somebody, visit somebody, do something else (give chocolate to the rector!) do it and see what happens. Philip went to the Gaza road and met a man that God wanted him to talk to. And note that when he got there he continued to listen so that he would know what God wanted him to do next.

If it is a piece of wisdom to share with somebody do so but do it gently and humbly. If the word is from God he will confirm it. Either by it being exactly what that person needed to hear or else by another wise Christian being able to say "Yes God has said the same thing to me" Philip was following the chariot and I suspect as he did so he was asking God what he wanted him to do. Because of that he heard God guiding him to ask the man if he understood what he was reading. That was a word of wisdom because it revealed the man's thirst for the word of God but his lack of understanding. So Philip was then able to preach the Gospel to him. The man was ready to receive God's word and so he was baptised there and then.

**4.If you were mistaken don't be discouraged.**

Keep listening and expecting God to speak to you. Ask him to help you recognise his voice and to give you the courage to obey.

**Filled with the Holy Spirit**

The disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit and it showed in their lives and in their ministry. So, assuming that the Gift of the Spirit is for all of us where do we go from here?

For the power of the Holy Spirit to fill us we need to do five things.

- (a) **We must want this power and yearn for it, not for ourselves but for the common good.** This yearning is a work of the Spirit and is referred to as "thirsting" in John 7:37ff <sup>37</sup> *On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, <sup>38</sup> and let the one who believes in me drink. As<sup>[a]</sup> the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart<sup>[b]</sup> shall flow rivers of living water.' "* <sup>39</sup> *Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit,<sup>[c]</sup> because Jesus was not yet glorified.* (note how the waters of life flow out of the person)
- (b) **We must repent.** Our old way of life must be subject to a radical turn round, with Jesus as Lord. Repentance will include confession of any unconfessed sin, and the renunciation of evil, but it will go much

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further than this. (c.f. Acts 2:38) <sup>38</sup> Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

- (c ) We must ask to be filled with the Holy Spirit. God wants to fill us with himself. In asking to be filled with the Holy Spirit we declare that we are willing for this to happen.
- (d) We must believe the promises of God. We may not feel any different, and we may have to wait for a while as the disciples did after Jesus had ascended to heaven. (Luke 24:49) If we ask sincerely then God will fill us with his Holy Spirit. (Luke 11:1-13) Many people are afraid of being filled with the Spirit. They are not certain what he might do and are afraid they may lose control of themselves/lives. The Holy Spirit will not hurt us. He loves us and wants the very best for us.
- (e) We must obey. "The Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him". (Acts 5:32) It is not uncommon for people to become convinced that God has filled them with his Holy Spirit when they step out in faith and obey an inner nudge of the Holy Spirit often with dramatic results. Often if we do that God rewards us by filling and empowering us. Sometimes we have to do something in faith expecting God to anoint us with the power to do what it is we think he is asking us to do, and as we obey him we see him working through us.

God loves us all more than we can begin to imagine. He is faithful and patient with us and he wants the very best for each of us.: In terms of wholeness and fullness of life and in terms of our relationship with him. His deepest wish is for us to be living lives that are holy and honouring to him, that are built on a complete dependence on him and trust in him. He wants us to live lives that show his power and his love in everything we do. He sends his Holy Spirit to fill us, to change us and to heal us. It is his wish for us and we simply need to turn to him confessing all we have done wrong and intending to make a new start. If we come to him open to what he wants to do in us he will fill us and use us to his honour and glory.