

Dreams and visions: the Spirit at work

Acts 16: 9-15; Psalm 67; Revelation 21: 10-14, 21:22-22:5; John 14: 23-29

Today's gospel reading contains a number of wonderful and important sayings of Jesus. In answer to a question from one of the disciples, Jesus says: *those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.* Jesus goes on to say: *the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.*

It is a tremendous promise, that the Father and the Son will dwell with the individual believer on a continuing and personal basis, and that the Holy Spirit will lead and guide us, speaking to us in our daily lives.

But how does God speak to us? What is the language of the Spirit? At times we cannot hear anything, and it seems as though God is silent. Sometimes we long for God to speak audibly, in a loud voice that everyone might hear, so that there might be no doubt whatsoever! However, as one of the readings in this week's morning office reminded us, God has spoken audibly at times and even that was no guarantee that people would hear. John records this incident in chapter 12 of his gospel: *Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it [that is God's name] and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder.* Others said that it must have been an angel. This indicates, I think that a receptive and hungry heart is required if we are to hear the voice of the Spirit. Scepticism and unbelief will cause us to miss the voice of God or render the language of the Spirit unintelligible.

Of course, the Holy Spirit speaks to us in a number of ways. We use one of them every time we hold a church service and read from the Bible, for the language of the Scriptures is one way the Holy Spirit speaks to us. Today's scripture readings illustrate another two ways of speaking: dreams and visions. We are a bit inclined, in our scientific age to dismiss dreams, though other ages and other cultures even today value them. Visions have fared much better, and "vision statements" are found everywhere. The scriptures frequently mention visions.

Take the very beautiful Psalm 67, for instance. Those old enough to remember the *Book of Common Prayer* services will recognise it as the *Deus misereatur*, the alternative to the *Nunc dimittis* at Evening Prayer. It is very much a vision of God's reign and his abundant blessings. What is most surprising about this psalm is its attitude to the nations. Often the foreign nations were seen as threats to the security of Judah and Israel. Many of the psalms are hostile to the nations and deal with their peoples severely. Yet here the prospect of salvation is held out to the nations and to all their peoples.

It reminds us that God enlightened Judah and Israel to be missionaries to the nations. They were truest to their calling when they heeded this call. In David's time converts had been made from neighbouring nations such as the Philistines, Edomites and Hittites, and by the time of Jesus there were Jewish proselytes and God-fearing worshippers in many places. But this psalm goes much further. It looks forward to the salvation of the whole earth, and envisages the entire world resounding with the praises of both Jew and Gentile.

The reading from the Acts of the Apostles shows the Spirit speaking to the Apostle Paul and his companions. Just prior to where today's reading begins we read: *they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.*

We do not know exactly how the Holy Spirit made it clear to Paul and his companions that they were not to evangelise in the Roman province of Asia, nor is it recorded what Paul thought of this prohibition. By any human standards it seemed a poor decision. Asia was home to the teeming metropolis of Ephesus, and all of the seven churches mentioned in the Book of Revelation. It contained cities with large Jewish populations and synagogues where, surely, Paul's message about the Risen Christ might profitably have been preached.

We only know that Paul was so in touch with the leading of the Holy Spirit that he knew God's will and obeyed. In a night vision he was directed to Macedonia and to the town of Philippi, a town with so few Jews that it had no synagogue, and Paul and his companions resorted to the river bank as a possible place of prayer. There they found only some women who had gathered. The lack of numbers and the humble circumstances made no difference to Paul who was faithful to his calling whatever the circumstances. The conversion of Lydia, apparently a woman of some wealth and standing is followed by the exorcising of a poor exploited slave girl emphasising the fact that in the Kingdom of God, all social barriers are broken down.

In the passage from Revelation we see John carried away “in the spirit” to a great, high mountain where he sees the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. This is visionary stuff indeed! Here, in what Bronwyn last week called the great meta-narrative of our faith, we see far beyond our immediate circumstances, and are given a glimpse into the ultimate purposes of God. We are reminded that the future belongs to God. John’s vision testifies to the conviction that good will triumph over evil. We see a world renewed and transformed; a world where God, his people, and all the nations of the world and their rulers live in intimacy and harmony with their Creator. John’s vision depicts in vivid, pictorial language those timeless spiritual truths about the fulfilment of all human longing for community and security.

Dreams and visions certainly fill our readings this morning, but you may be left wondering how these dramatic events relate to our everyday lives. I have to confess to never having had a vision remotely like that of John in the book of Revelation. Nor do I usually remember many of my dreams.

Perhaps the point lies rather in our preparedness to be receptive to the leading of the Holy Spirit, and to seek to hear what is spoken to us by whatever means God chooses to use. We need to allow ourselves to be a fitting place for the Father and the Son to dwell, to expect that God will speak to us in one of the languages of the Spirit, whether that is through a vision or a dream, through the public reading of the Scriptures, or a thoughtful reading of them alone. Whether it is at God’s table in the Holy Communion, through the circumstances of our own lives, by means of an audible voice, or as is perhaps more common via the still, small voice of calm, or impression of the heart.

Hearing from God is foundational to our Christian lives, for we know that *we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God*. We just need to ask God to speak.

There is a lovely old hymn that expresses this thought:

Master, speak! Thy servant heareth,
Waiting for Thy gracious word,
Longing for Thy voice that cheereth;
Master! let it now be heard.
I am listening, Lord, for Thee:
What hast Thou to say to me?

Master, speak! Though least and lowest,
Let me not unheard depart;
Master, speak! For O, Thou knowest
All the yearning of my heart,
Knowest all its truest need:
Speak! and make me blest indeed.

Master, speak! and make me ready,
When Thy voice is truly heard,
With obedience glad and steady
Still to follow every word.
I am listening, Lord, for Thee:
Master, speak! O, speak to me!

The Lord be with you.