

## God Speaks Your Language

*“Today, if you will hear His voice...” (Hebrews 4:7)*

God wants us to know Him. He wants us to hear His voice and experience His presence and power to live. Jesus came into the world to open up a conversation with the human race. The essence of Christianity is going beyond ourselves and living in right relationship with the one true God, who is “here and now”. Until that happens in human experience, men and women will always be incomplete, their faith will reside in dead works or secular humanism (man as god), their notions of truth will be relativistic and their hopes will lack eternal anchors or reference points. If Christian faith is to be relevant to modern man it must be real and attainable.

Think about the some of the questions people ask about God.

- *If God exists, where is He?*

How do I find God? What is His address? Is He hiding? Perhaps I am looking down the wrong streets. Does he even know I exist? Wouldn't it be ironic to discover He had given up on the human race and gone on a galactic safari and left us to our own devices (as some cynics suggest)? On the other hand, if He only lives in fancy cathedrals He must be getting pretty lonely, as attendances of traditional churches decline.

- *What language does God speak?*

What is God's language? If I don't know, how can I talk to Him? Is it ancient Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek or Chaldean, the languages of the Bible? I have visited towns in Syria where people speak Aramaic and boast they communicate the way Jesus did. Muslims believe God's words can only be read in Classical Arabic, effectively placing them beyond the reach of scores of millions of adherents outside of the Middle East who only speak and read the vernacular. If God cares for our race, why can't we communicate with Him? How can we expect to understand Him if we speak another dialect? For hundreds of years professional priests were the only people in churches who were permitted to read God's book; until Vatican II, everyone else in the Roman Catholic community had to take their word for it. Does God use the out-of-date vocabulary in which some Bibles are written and clerics pray?

- *What is God really like?*

Who understands God's nature? Have all religions recreated Him in their cultural images? When I was a child, my sister and I drew sketches of God, using crayons and coloured pencils; we then put our efforts to our bemused parents to choose who was right. If God is invisible maybe he is offended (or amused) by the caricatures we draw. Is He like Santa Claus? Or is He a stern patriarch with a long white beard? Is my God the same as yours? What colour is He? Can knowing Him be judged objectively? Do all roads lead to God, as Universalists claim, or are we playing silly mind games? If, as some believe, He is inscrutable and capricious, are we simply pawns in His hands, subjects of egregious predestination? If so, why make the effort?

- *If God cares for His creation, why doesn't He come and fix it up?*

Not a day passes without news broadcasts relating stories of immense tragedy. For example, look at what has been happening of late on God's green planet. In the past century the population of the world has multiplied by a factor of three; fresh water consumption is up by six times; however, 20% of the world lacks access to fresh water. Some 40% of the world does not have access to electricity. Nearly one billion people are under-nourished. Nearly three quarters of the major fishing zones are in decline. Half the world lives on less than \$2 a day, while nearly \$US900 billion is committed to military expenditure. Climate change threatens the viability of several small countries, such as Kiribati. The ozone layer is being depleted. The world's rainforests are disappearing at a frightening rate. The world's leaders will not commit to effective sustained development and climate management. Sadly, the damage has already been done and many of the trends cannot be reversed. In this environment people demand, "Where is God?" Is he an absent landlord? Why doesn't he step in and say, "Guys, enough is enough"?

- *Who worships Him the right way?*

There are so many variations on the same theme, but enough differences to raise the question of who is right. Given major (and often conflicting) differences between faiths, we can't all be right. Maybe we have missed the point. During the Middle Ages theologians debated the number of angels that could fit onto a pinhead. Hardly a salient issue, when armies fought protracted wars across Europe in the name of religion. Umberto Eco posed a similarly effete question when he asked ("The Name of the Rose") "Does God laugh?" The debate divided an entire abbey. Will our lives be enhanced by knowing the answers? Isn't there more to life? Who's right? What is prayer anyway? Mental gymnastics? Chatting to lifeless statues? Talking to oneself? Following voices? Maybe God sees us trying, and wonders what on earth the chatter is about. Is there a correct posture? A best time of day? What if we miss an appointment? Does it matter if we don't turn up? What if He is so busy doing something else that our needs escape Him altogether?

The above questions are not meant to be flippant. In fact, in one form or another, they pepper books like Job, Psalms and Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament. People ask them for a variety of reasons, not merely because they are innately hostile or reductionist. For some, the questions are theoretical, or philosophical, an exercise of the mind. Others try to explore the hard issues because the answers to existential questions hang on knowing the fundamental meaning and purpose of life, and their efforts prove disappointing or confusing.

### *Seeking simplicity*

When David Livingstone was growing up in Blantyre, Scotland, he was subjected to "a thrashing" because he refused to read William Wilberforce's book on *Practical Christianity*. He called it "dry doctrinal reading". How can a guide to practicing faith, written by a great reformer (Wilberforce was instrumental in eliminating abuses in English prisons and abolishing slavery) be so unappealing?

I have read *Practical Christianity*. I ordered it because I liked the title (it is still stocked by Christian publishing houses) and was keen to know how give practical effect to my faith. When the mail came I was disappointed because *Practical Christianity* read more like a complex credo than a “how to” of Biblical truth. It was written for another time, in the language of another time. The “uninitiated” man or woman on the street would have difficulty understanding it. If people do not understand, they usually give up.

Booksellers report that “How to” books (or “Dummies” guides) predominate in the publishing market. Take titles such as: “How to Speak Urdu”, “How to Keep Canaries”, “DIY (Do It Yourself) Vehicle and Home Renovation” (be prepared for left-over parts). People want hands-on examples and explanations, written in language they can understand, not textbooks written by experts for experts. We are all wired differently. I, for one, have difficulty understanding exploding diagrams. Give me a demo any day, in words I understand and then I’ll have a modicum of understanding. Likewise, simplicity is essential when exploring eternal issues.

God speaks your language. You may have difficulty understanding Churchese. You may not grasp the more complex elements of exegesis that go over most peoples’ heads. That’s OK. As Spurgeon once told his Bible College students, Jesus instructed Peter to “Feed my sheep”, not “Feed my giraffes”. In fact, God’s message is very simple. The Body of Christ is diverse and rich with cultural expression, but the bottom line is straightforward. Read God’s words with an open mind and the Holy Spirit will help you understand and apply them. The Gospel is good for every generation and applies to every generation, every language, and every culture, regardless of age, gender or social status. It is not ethnocentric. While words alone cannot describe the greatness and the nature of God (He cannot be neatly analyzed; the Bible says His ways are “past finding out”, Romans 11:33), He has chosen to use ordinary languages to communicate with us. The Gospel is so simple it can be explained in all of the world’s 6,500 languages (plus dialects). Only men have made God’s words sound complicated.

Consider how much more complex the world is compared to when the New Testament was written. Jesus didn’t speak English. He never used a microwave, never logged onto a computer, blogged or sent an SMS message. He never watched a movie on an I-pod, never heard of AIDS, Avian Flu, or DNA; he never discussed stem cell research or the ethics of euthanasia. Yet the message He proclaimed continues to resonate in villages and cities, palaces and prisons in thousands of languages and dialects around the world, arresting people, changing lives, meeting needs and giving hope. It is timeless. Superficially, we have nothing in common with people who lived in Jesus day, yet we have everything in common. Man has not changed. The problems we face, the questions we pose, the fears, joys, disappointments and relationship difficulties that existed in His day, are ours.

*God came to us*

Language involves sounds, movements, symbols, nuances, communicated meanings and understandings. So, how does a far-off God communicate with His creation? How does He break the language barrier? He does so by coming to us. Let me illustrate what I mean.

My father was a very pragmatic man. He worked in the railways for 46 years, so he had to be down-to-earth. He and my mother established the local Baptist church under our house and he was my Sunday Teacher for years (which meant that I had to listen to him and behave during lessons). When I asked about on one occasion how God speaks to us, he didn't try to explain it in esoteric language. He didn't talk about "transcendence" or the "three Os" I heard preachers talking about (omniscience, omnipresence and omnipotence, all of them characteristics of God's nature), but took me out the back of the house to a mound of ants near the chicken shed. Standing above the nest, he called out to them and told them he cared for them. The ants, in response, scurried away in the opposite direction. It seemed those with food took refuge underground, while the fighters came out and glared up at him. The more he tried to reason with them, the madder they became. After a few minutes he stopped trying. Clearly, he was not on their wavelength. They feared him and his presence upset their equilibrium. I'll never forget his conclusion. Turning to me he said, "The only way to communicate with this colony of ants is to become an ant". That's how God did it. Look at the way it happened.

God speaks to us. He spoke face-to-face with our first parents after creating them (until they thought they knew better and went their own way). He speaks to us through creation and its order. From the smallest sub-atomic particle to the vast expanse of the universe, the greatness and majestic work of God are evident (Psalm 19:1-6; Romans 1:19, 20), if we will not lapse into patterns of rejection. He did this so that we would see His hand at work and seek him. Instead we focused on the created elements and worshipped them instead of their Maker. God speaks to us through the conscience he has given us (Proverbs 20:17). His law is "written on our hearts" (Romans 2:14, 15), reflecting His moral character and teaching us what is right and wrong. The problem is that we can harden and deaden our consciences, rendering them ineffective to moral responsibility. We can shut our ears to His voice. God spoke to the world by judging sin through a flood (Genesis 6). Having ceased pleading with men's hearts (Genesis 6:3), he allowed the consequences of sin to take effect; the majority perished. However, it wasn't long before the survivors reverted to drunkenness, immorality and idolatry. He then spoke to a smaller group, giving them deliverers and lawmakers who taught them His ways. But miracles only last as long as the "Wow!" factor. Next he sent them messengers, so that they might seek after Him (2 Peter 1:20, 21). The prophets were invariably rejected; some were killed (Matthew 23:37). God did all of this so that we would seek Him.

Finally, he sent His Son (Hebrews 1:2). Like the analogy of the ants, He became one of us, so that He could communicate His message in a way we could understand. Many of the world's religious systems involve man trying to reach Godhood. The Christian message involved God taking up humanhood instead (Philippians 2:5-11). Look at Jesus and you will see what God is like. Jesus said that He and Father were one (John 10:30). "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). He told His followers that knowing God is the key to eternal life (John 17:3). One God; one revelation. This puts an end to religious pluralism and requires that inter-faith dialogue recognize the centrality of Christ when it comes to the way of salvation. This goes way beyond scrolls and tablets. The Bible, as we know it, is the Word of God. More than 2,000 times in the Old Testament this is affirmed, as well as in the New Testament. However, the Word of God is also a Person.

In Saudi Arabia there are no official churches. The Kingdom is the official custodian of the two key sites in Islam (in Mecca and Medina) and the Wahabi sect keeps the country in an iron grip. I have seen people being beaten by the “Mutaween”, or religious police, in the capital, Riyadh, for arriving late at a mosque for prayers. Christian gatherings are illegal. However, I have discovered this does not mean Saudis are not interested in spiritual things. I was reading my Bible on a flight from Riyadh to Dubai one night (because of my particular passport it had not been confiscated) when a fellow-passenger in a dishdash saw what I was doing and told me he was interested in knowing more about how Islam and Christianity compared. He told me he was a sheikh. His four (veiled) wives and two of his children were settled across the other side of the Airbus, so we talked. We discussed the histories of both faiths and I outlined what I believed, as a Christian. I explained that one of the main differences was that, whereas Muslims believe the Koran is the word (or “recitation”) of God in a book, for Christians the Word came out of the pages, became flesh and blood and lived among us (John 1:1-14). I told Him Jesus was more than a prophet; he showed us what God is like. We parted friends and I was glad of a brief opportunity to tell someone how God can be known, because He came to us, not on the pages of a book, but in person. If we stop at the book we end up mired in Bibliolatry; the text is important, but the key to understanding it is one-to-one relationship with the Living Word.

When I met Christian friends on the Ucayali River in Peru they told me the joy they felt when they heard portions of the New Testament in their Campa dialect (courtesy of Wycliffe translators). “We knew that the God who made all this had come to our village. Through His words we came to know Jesus.” Paul says that God is not far from any of us (Acts 17:27). He expressed it this way: “In Him we live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28). God is standing in front of you. All you need is the connection. Faith, the Holy Spirit’s enabling and the grace of God make it happen.

### *God still speaks to us*

God still speaks. Through the Bible. Through our circumstances. Through the wisdom of other Christians who know Him. Through the voice of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. Through the “foolishness” of preaching, not relying on human wisdom (2 Corinthians 2:1-6), but using human agents to explain His word the way Jesus did (whether in pulpits, books or over the Internet).

If God is near us, why do so many people miss Him?

First, the Bible says they do so because they are unable to discern spiritual things (2 Corinthians 4:4). All explanations fall on deaf ears, because the capacity to see, hear and understand is hampered by unbelief and indifference. Secular epistemology (the way thinking about ideas and knowledge takes shape and forms belief patterns) is without God (a-theistic) or without knowledge of him (a-gnostic). When a non-Christian claims he or she “can’t see” what the Bible is all about, they are telling the truth. Only when the Holy Spirit opens our eyes do we grasp what is going on (Acts 26:18). This is called “revelation”, which means, “pulling aside a curtain”, or “disclosure”. One minute we can’t see; the next minute the veil is withdrawn and everything is obvious. Everything we understand as Christians comes to us by revelation. Anyone can have revelation; all it takes is willingness.

If there are things you don't understand, ask God to give you clarity. Don't give up and say that it is all "too hard". He can say it in your vocabulary. Your willingness and God's faithfulness will enable you to grow in understanding. As you relate to other Christians on the same journey you will be able to check out the more complicated parts, sort out fact from fiction and remain objective. It will all make sense.

Second people are not taught to listen to God. In church settings we are often taught to listen to sermons (or to watch PowerPoint slides), but not to tune into the Holy Spirit speaking through those messages. When I was growing up I was told that, with the completion of the Bible, God stopped speaking. That's weird. You mean, God just shut up? That he has not been speaking for two thousand years? No way. He is just as real today as He was to the first church. He is still the creator (Revelation 4:11). He still upholds everything with His word of power (Hebrews 1:3). He is still involved in human affairs. He still has something to say to all of us (Hebrews 4:7; Mark 4:23, 7:16). The problem, as we have learned in the mobile telephone age, is that we can miss calls because the unit is switched off or we are busy with other interlocutors and the message bank is full. If you want to hear God you need to keep the line open.

Start spending time alone with God. At home, in the car, wherever you are least distracted. He will be there. Ask Him to talk to you, in your heart, by the voice of the Holy Spirit. Schedule your time to open your Bible and let him speak to you from the record (make sure you get a version you can understand). Spend time with other Christians and learn how they recognize when he is speaking to them. You will quickly learn how to tune in. Whether you are coasting through life or experiencing deep personal crisis, God loves you and is speaking to you. Open up to Him. If you will hear His voice and determine to live in accordance with His will, your life will be full, you will have a new sense of confidence amid hassles or fears and your circumstances will make sense, in the context of His eternal purpose. God speaks your language. Use it to speak back to him.

Where is God? He is all around us. Where does He live? At your address. What language does He speak? Your language, jargon and all (why not, indeed?). The Day of Pentecost confirmed that people from every corner of the globe will one day hear His voice and understand the message (Acts 2:1-11). What is God like? He is like Jesus. Why doesn't He come and fix up this mess? He has, and He does, through Christians and the exercise of His dynamic power in transforming the lives of those who reach out to Him. Who worships Him the right way? Those who do so in Spirit and in truth (John 4:23, 24), with the heart and mind engaged in relating to him as a person, rather than a concept or a distant being.

What is the role of relevant Christianity? To connect people with God.