

We have heard from God. Have we obeyed?

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Acts 16:9-15; Psalm 67; Revelation 21:10-14, 21:22-22.5; John 5:1-9

“There was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.” Most likely it was Pentecost. Jesus found his way to the famous pool and saw there a crippled man, who had lain there for many years, in the hope of a miraculous healing. We don’t know why Jesus chose this man to heal; perhaps it was because Jesus knew how the man would respond.

Jesus asked the man if he wanted to be cured. It wasn’t such a silly question as we might think. The man had waited for thirty-eight years; he might well have been content to stay an invalid and live on handouts. After all, to be healed would demand huge change in his life and he would have to find a way to earn a living. Jesus also asks us whether we really want to be changed.

Then Jesus spoke the word of command. “Take up your bed and walk!” It’s as if he said, “You do it!” In fact, that just what he did say. The man had to act, and God gave the power, the strength, the ability. God is not in the business of frustrating us as we respond. The man was able to get up and walk.

Nonetheless the man’s obedience to Jesus soon got him into trouble with the authorities. It was the Sabbath and he was not supposed to be carrying his bed or anything else. When we act in response to Jesus, there may well be strife with the authorities; there may be difficulties and possibly suffering. But God’s words, God’s vision, achieve the purpose for which they are sent—in this case, a healing and testimony of the ministry of Christ. In John’s gospel, this is the first of several incidents in which Jesus and his message begin to be rejected, leading ultimately to the cross.

Why did the man act? Because Jesus told him to, and because the man discerned within himself that Jesus had made it possible for him to walk. “Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ”, as Romans:10.17 says.

Notice that the text says that when Jesus spoke the word of healing “*at once* the man was made well, took up his mat and began to walk.” (The bed by the way, was easily carried, just a light pallet, stretcher or mat.) The fact of the healing — the ability to walk, to take action, came from the words of Jesus.

That is not to say that healing does not sometimes may take time. Nor does it say that sometimes we may have to think and struggle within our minds to reach a position of understanding, belief, and faith. But it does say that God’s words to us in Christ themselves empower us to respond.

Paul and his travelling companions had been in the provinces of Phrygia and Galatia, in what is now Turkey, but were directed by the Holy Spirit not to minister in the province of Asia, to the east. Nor were they allowed by God to go into Bithynia. So they must have been wondering, quite literally, “Where to next?”

Don’t we, in our own lives and our life as a church often ask the same question, “Where to next?” It’s a question we best come to when we are not captive to old ways of doing things or paralysed by traditions and property.

Not that I’m saying that we shouldn’t have tradition. On the contrary, I rejoice in much of our tradition as God-given. But we must not be captive to tradition and old ways of doing things.

Jesus' words empowered the man beside the pool to break free from the crippled past and to move.

Similarly with Paul and his friends; the previous plans — no doubt good plans — had been countermanded by the Spirit. So Paul was ready to act when he heard afresh from God. He went to Macedonia — and so began the ministry of the church in Europe.

So, here we have two examples — Paul, and the man beside the pool — of changed lives in response to a word from God. But, we might well ask, how can we hear in such a way, how can we recognise that God is speaking to us? The man beside the pool may never have seen or heard Jesus before, but it was Jesus after all, and his words had unique authority.

Most importantly, of course, God speaks through the scriptures. The scriptures themselves also describe many gifts of the Holy Spirit through which we may hear from God — gifts of prophecy, gifts of a word of wisdom, gifts of a word of knowledge, discerning of spirits, gifts of a special kind of faith, gifts of tongues and interpretation of tongues. I'm confident that the Holy Spirit gives and uses such gifts in the church today.

One thing important in recognising and responding to our Lord is, simply, practice. As always, we can begin simply. Responding to God is often a matter of doing what is good, of keeping a sensitive conscience, of obeying the great commandments of love for God and our neighbour. As we read and pray, as we learn to respond to the inner promptings of God in our minds and in our consciences, we become schooled in the way of God, the pathways of the Spirit.

A most important way that God speaks with us, personally and as a body, is through the ministry of preaching — the faithful week-by-week exposition of the scriptures. Our rector, the Reverend Rob Lamerton, may or may not cast himself in the role of a great prophet; but he is most wonderfully the person given to us by God from whom to hear in the preaching of the Scriptures. Each time the Bible is opened from this pulpit, because of God's grace and God's gift, the Holy Spirit speaks to each of us and to all of us.

For example, let's remind ourselves of some of the things that we heard during the Epiphany season. After returning from his leave, Rob first spoke to us the second Sunday after Epiphany, the 14th of January. The Gospel was about the wedding where Jesus turned the water into wine. "Jesus", Rob said, "is the one who replaces Jewish tradition with celebratory joy! God is one who rejoices over his people as a bridegroom rejoices over the bride. It's rejoicing at restoration — the restoration of God's people!"

"It raises the question", Rob said, of "how do *we* go about restoring God's people? We can be frightened and *uncertain what to say* ... we now need the ability to tell our faith story which is made up of many faith stories!" The next week, the third Sunday after Epiphany, Rob reminded us that "The times in the life of the Christian and others when God seems to intervene, giving strength and direction, hope and comfort, wisdom beyond knowledge, are times that we need to reflect on and talk about as ways of putting a human framework to the gift, the blessing, the grace of God."

A week later, the 28th of January, Rob concluded his sermon by reading from 1 Corinthians 13 — the discourse on love. Rob said, "When we are tempted to be annoyed at God because we think God should treat us better, maybe we should read this passage, ponder it for ten minutes, and then make our confession for about two hours!"

On the 5th Sunday after Epiphany, we were reminded us that, even though God may not call many of us to be missionaries on the other side of the earth, God does challenge us to be the best at what we are — in our daily round, in care and faithfulness.

“We are not made worthy by how we respond,” Rob said. “We are made worthy simply by the fact that it is God who calls us.”

On February 11th, reflecting on Jesus ‘sermon on the plain’ — the “level place” — Rob thought aloud about how we Christians are called to live out our faith in the midst of all that is around us — among people of all faiths and none. He posed for us the question of how we can relate to “the crowd who have not yet comprehended the call.”

The final Sunday in Epiphany, the 18th of February, was the celebration of the Transfiguration of Our Lord. “It makes us think of change”, Rob said, “and how we come to see things differently.” Again there was the question of how we can bridge the gap between our church community and the community around us. “Let us ponder what has opened our eyes to know a little more of God,” Rob said, “and move on with our eyes open to change!”

Yes, we have heard richly from God. Have we responded? Have we obeyed? Like the man lying beside the pool in Jerusalem, the question for us is not, “What does Jesus say?” but whether we will do it.