

SERMON FOR TRINITY 9 | 13 August 2017

Holding on to the straps of a pretty packed tube train on Thursday, I happened to notice two people next to me. As far as I could tell, both of them were deaf and – as the train jolted along – they were doing their best to sign to one another.

Actually they made it look remarkably easy and matter of fact but it did make me think: not which would be worse - being blind or being deaf - but how awful it would be not being able to communicate with other people at all.

Not being able to hear is a really sad handicap – and something one learns to appreciate even more as one gets older, knowing that we miss a higher percentage of what is being said around us, especially in restaurants, pubs and busy rooms. Lip reading is a great skill but there is so much more to life than the deliberate need to face someone and speak clearly: the sounds of a busy street, children laughing, the gurgle of water splashing – and of course the constant delight of every kind of music. I have a profound respect for those who have to live in a silent world – and even more for those whose tinnitus means they have to live with a continual squealing in their ears.

But for those whose mental functions are all there but who cannot say what they are thinking must be immensely challenging. Seeing the children at Richard Cloudesley School in their huge wheelchairs full of high tech gizmos and mounted tablets struggling to articulate their thoughts via pictures and symbols is a hugely humbling experience. The ability of people like Stephen Hawking to overcome their difficulties by twitching controls is a further sign of our human capacity to overcome loss but we who can hear and speak remain in awe of those who have to work so hard to communicate. And those with various forms of ‘locked-in’ syndrome are, of course, the most unfortunate of all. The stories of people who are released after years of being paralysed and, to all intents and purposes, silent, are too awful to contemplate.

I wanted to use these well-known physical issues as a way into today’s readings where the major stories – of Elijah and of St Peter on the lake with Jesus – invite us to consider another kind of deafness.

The story of Elijah is familiar. After months running away from Ahab and his vicious wife Jezebel, God's sole remaining prophet Elijah is at his wits end. He finally reaches a cave to shelter in - and God then asks him what he is doing there?!

But of course that isn't the question at all: God knows perfectly well why Elijah is hiding in the cave. What he wants to know is why Elijah is feeling so alone? We might say: because he was alone: all the other faithful prophets had been killed by the King.

God's response is to show Elijah that he has not been alone – and he isn't alone now either. And to prove it we get those noises at the mouth of the cave – earthquakes, winds, fire and all. And then the still small voice which Elijah knows to be the authentic voice of God himself.

The still small voice that has been accompanying Elijah all along – but he never heard it. So busy with outwitting the false prophets and avoiding arrest, the reason why Elijah had become more and more morose was because he had failed to hear the encouragement and strengthening power that was his for the asking.

Similarly the picture we have in the Gospel - of Peter's crashing loss of faith: he really could walk on water as Jesus had invited him to do ... at least until he began to realise just how ridiculous and impossible an idea that was! Then he begins to sink and has to hear Jesus' voice once more and his helping hand to get back into the boat with the other disciples. *O ye of little faith* says Jesus, and rightly so.

Being deaf, being spiritually deaf, is what these stories are about. The Bible takes the concept of deafness with which we are all familiar and applies it to us, we who consider ourselves well able to hear in the normal sense. And the unmistakable conclusion is that we are failing to hear the voice of God in very much the same way as Elijah and Peter failed to perceive it.

Because if Elijah had listened – even in the heat of his campaigns – to what God had been whispering in his ear, all that loneliness and self-pity would have receded and he would not have been running away in fear and desperation.

If Peter had trusted Jesus on the lake and put his doubts to one side, he too would have achieved what normal people would consider impossible. That is what God is good at: finding ways for us to do things that are otherwise beyond us.

And not just for ourselves either. In the parallel Gospel account in St John, Jesus asks Peter a question: *Peter, do you love me?* And Peter blusters as usual, *Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.* To which Jesus replies, three times, *Then feed my sheep.*

And here Elijah's cave experience comes into its own: because we often expect God's messages to come in tragedies and storms of one kind or another: a tsunami, an earthquake, a tragic war or the catastrophic events in the Mediterranean as boatloads of people are drowned. Sometimes God's call does come that way and we thank him that people respond so generously.

But what of the day to day stuff, the relatively small things around us that need our loving attention – this or that person who drains us of imagination and love by their attitudes and their behaviour? And equally, what about our own need of reassurance, the confidence-building that tells us that we *can* cope with what faces us – or may face us in the future?

Being deaf to God's still small voice with its wisdom and its advice leaves us bereft of the one thing that will enable to truly enjoy all that he has given us – and enable us to be the people he made us to be, generous, forgiving and at peace with ourselves.

Poor Elijah: he was so busy chasing demons – and being chased by them – that he became deaf to the love that God had for him in the middle of all those crises. Peter, let's be honest, was so busy showing off as he strode across the water that he failed to remember that this extraordinary thing he was doing was down – not to his own abilities – but to the power of Jesus to call him to walk across the waves. Both had Spiritual deafness.

Lord, we thank you for our ability to hear with our ears. Help us to listen to your inner voice with the intuition of faith, that we may hear your words of comfort and your call to serve you wherever we go.