

HEARING GOD'S VOICE THROUGH PRAYER

Jane Holloway

JANE HOLLOWAY, THE NATIONAL PRAYER DIRECTOR FOR THE WORLD PRAYER CENTRE, EXPLORES HOW WE CAN BE OPEN TO HEARING FROM GOD

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So here we are at the start of another year, 2021 stretches out before us. And while in past years we would have been eagerly awaiting the beginning of new initiatives, projects and setting our New Year's resolutions, this January will be very different.

Many Christians have turned to prayer, especially during lockdown 1.0 and 2.0, and there have been numerous prayer initiatives all across our UK nations led by denominations, national and local organisations, which has meant many more people have attended prayer meetings online than they ever did in person! And it has also been noted that large numbers of people, as yet outside the church family, have turned to prayer, seeking help and peace. How can we all seek to move forward in learning how to listen as we journey through 2021?

HEARING GOD'S VOICE – PERSONALLY

I have found the discipline of writing this has given me permission to reflect on my experience over these last nine months and note how the Holy Spirit has been

speaking into my personal situation and into the groups of which I am a part, locally and nationally. Personally I sit within both the charismatic and contemplative streams but I am finding new ways to seek out God's company in order to enjoy his presence and gain his perspective. I am loving God out of doors, loving God through ritual and symbol, loving God by loving others (as I am my elderly mother's main carer) and have found inspiration through the book by Gary Thomas: 'Sacred Pathways – Discover your Soul's Path to God'. Yesterday morning, as I began to write this, I looked up into the early morning sky over my mother's house to see an incredible thick white cross covering half of the sky made by two plane trails. That was a deeply reassuring sign to me on the third day of lockdown 2.0 that on the cross death was defeated, Jesus is on the throne and that all things are under his authority and helping me again put my trust and faith in him and him alone.

Two insights have helped me recognise the complexities of our current situation. The first is: understanding that we are all living in a time of trauma, which affects how we react to and cope physically, mentally and spiritually with life. This can easily make us less confident of whose voice we might be hearing – our own or God's. The second is learning to embrace that we are also living in transition, between what we called normal and what is yet to emerge. This also impacts our spiritual walk with God. I have found the Transition Prayer

Journey from LICC (London Institute of Contemporary Christianity) a helpful tool to learn more about the four key stages of transition: discerning the signals of change; ending well as you let go of the old; feeling disorientated; and getting re-orientated.

Online surveys have shown that more people are turning to the Bible as a source of help. Spending time in God's word has always been foundational to the way I seek to listen and follow the Lord. But I have been drawn more intentionally to embracing Old and New Testament scriptures daily in order to gain a broader narrative. The Psalms have particularly come alive to me and, I know, for many others as they help us to express the deepest feelings to God about what we are living through, particularly using the prayer of lament. Just this morning Psalm 91:15 spoke into today's assignment! 'When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honour them.'

Each of us, created in our own unique way by our heavenly Father, will have our own different experiences of how we are made to hear God's voice. For some it comes through the scriptures, for others through asking questions in the place of prayer, for others in times of fasting, solitude, worship – there are so many ways to position ourselves. I think our challenge, as we all seek to move in step with how the Holy Spirit is leading, is to review how we are making time

to discern the voice of the Lord above the noise and confusion of our culture. It is interesting to note how John Mark Comer's book 'The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry' (written before 2020) has become a best seller as people are being reminded about the disciplines of slowing, silence, solitude and Sabbath. For me the prayer technique of 'Examen' is one of the best ways of noting the many and various ways that God 'speaks' to me - an ancient discipline of simply pausing to review the day that has just past, noting where God has been at work and whether I have been open or not to that, bringing any regrets to the foot of the cross, asking for his grace for the day ahead and then noting or journaling what I discern.

HEARING GOD'S VOICE – WITH OTHERS

I have the privilege of linking up with many different groups to pray for our nation and the nations, all via Zoom. The lockdown has enabled us to connect much more than we previously did in physical meetings. A spirit of humility, honouring the different gifts, and recognising that God gives different perspectives has been essential in our discernment. The Lord has spoken into our gatherings about his heart for his people, his longing to lead us out into new rhythms and the need for us to wait on him, wait for him and to wait with him in these days. Ministering to the Lord in worship has been a vital part of these times of listening. We are learning that, the more we focus on the risen Lord and get his perspective, the more we are enabled to link up in line with the prayers of heaven. We are also learning not to be afraid to ask God questions in order to gain a shared agreement for what we should be praying. In every case, we have received much encouragement from the Holy Spirit as he has shown us scriptures to use, declarations to make and areas to release prayer into.

Learning to use Zoom for hearing God in the place of prayer, technically as well as spiritually, has been a big learning curve for many of us! Nothing beats gathering together physically and I know I, along with others, have struggled with this new format. Once, when I was asking the Lord how I could meet him in this way last autumn, I sensed the Holy Spirit whisper 'Don't watch but worship'. This has transformed the way I approach and use all online pathways.

The pandemic has forced a number of groups, networks, churches and organisations to go back to their foundations to hear their fresh mandate for the future. Friends who lead Flame International called for a twenty-one day pray and fast season in 2020 for their close supporters. They received twenty-one A4 pages of God's prophecies, sharing: 'We have taken great encouragement from many of them, been chastened by some, and most of which sent us to get down on our knees ... we have worked to ensure all legal compliance was in place, our motives and attitudes in line with the Lord's word and to be ready for a fresh move of the Holy Spirit when we return to the overseas mission field.'

HEARING GOD'S VOICE – FOR OUR OUTREACH AND MISSION

So many of the initiatives that churches and organisations have started, either before or during the pandemic to serve their communities, have at their source a person or a group of people who sought the Lord within the place of prayer, heard his voice and then sought to put it into practice. Partnerships have developed in many towns and cities with church unity movements working together with local councils, businesses and charities. 'Prayer has played a crucial part in our journey through COVID-19. It has opened doors that were previously shut, brought favour in place of suspicion, brought unity instead of division and sustained faith where we were weary. Lockdown forced us both to slow down to pray individually and to discover new ways of praying together.' (Love Southampton article, Evangelical Alliance's 'Idea' magazine, November 2020)

The desire of us all has been to see a fresh move of the Holy Spirit in the middle of this crisis leading people into a relationship with Jesus. Initiatives like Try Praying have adapted their resources from 'use it or lose it' to 'try it and buy it' and are finding new ways to invite those who don't yet know Jesus personally to explore prayer. Hope Together and the 24-7 Prayer Hope Spaces, designed to help those who are spiritually seeking God, have created a new out-facing website. Hope Together and Every Home for Christ are planning to make 2021 a year of prayer walking with a specially designed app. Prayer walking is a brilliant way to listen to the voice of our Father as we see, feel and experience real life at street or road level and are able

to bless the people and places through which we walk.

In my circles of connections, the Lord has spoken much about reset and his repurposing of us, his church, to get us ready for the next stage of the journey. We have been challenged by his rebuke; we have been encouraged by all his promises and together we believe that, as we continue to seek to listen and to obey what he shows us, we will see him lead us through into new ways of worship and witness both in our homes and in corporate gatherings in the future. His words of comfort speak into our storms today: 'Take courage. It is I. Do not be afraid' (Matthew 14:27).

Early in 2020 the Lord spoke to us in the World Prayer Centre team that it was time to get ready to move from our base in the centre of Birmingham. We met together and said 'We are ready, Lord'. Lockdown 1.0 made it very clear that we could not stay and so we gave our notice to the landlord and moved out at the end of October 2020, so now working from home, and hosting all our prayer gatherings online. We have a real sense of excitement for the next stage of our Abrahamic journey - and we know we are not alone in learning to walk along unfamiliar paths. 'I will lead the blind by ways they have not known, along unfamiliar paths I will guide them; I will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth. These are the things I will do; I will not forsake them.' Isaiah 42:16.

Jane Holloway has been the National Prayer Director for the World Prayer Centre, Birmingham, since 2005 - a role that gives her lots of scope to encourage, mobilise and network in prayer across the British Isles and Europe. Visit www.worldprayer.org.uk for further details.

