

*At the beginning of this sermon I paused for 10 seconds, once or twice looking as if I were about to speak and then apparently thinking better of it.*

It's very disconcerting when you expect someone to speak to you and they don't, isn't it? In that short period, there (and it was only ten seconds or so), you were probably wondering what was going on, why wasn't I saying something, and when would I finally get round to speaking?

Ten seconds you were waiting for me to start to talk.

The whole history of Israel had been filled with God's power. At the outset, the stories in Genesis and Exodus, feature God appearing and communicating directly with mankind, albeit appearing as a burning bush or some such similar manifestation. Later on God spoke to His people through the prophets such as Amos, Jeremiah and so on.

However, four hundred years had passed with no communication from God either directly or indirectly. A people who had been used to regular dialogue with God suddenly found itself (apparently) cut-off. If ten seconds seemed a long time to you, imagine what four hundred years was like to the people of Israel.

And then, when it must have seemed that God had decided not to bother with them any more, a voice called out from the wilderness, the voice of a new prophet, John the Baptist. John's message was simple but clear - repent for your sins. But there was more to it than that.

True, John told everyone and kept on telling them what they were doing wrong but he also told them what to do to achieve righteousness. He wasn't simply telling them off, chastising them for past wrongs, but was actually giving them directions as to how to come to terms with God. This was no simple negative message, but one of positive encouragement.

All too often, it seems, we are quick to point out people's failures without giving them the guidance and encouragement they need to do better next time. As a parent I know that I suffer as parents everywhere from being quick to tell our children off without giving them the positive feedback they need to grow. At work, it's all too easy to criticise, but not so easy to encourage. In our daily lives too, we need to be aware that there's a time for criticism and a time to help; to indicate the correct way to perform any task.

Like John the Baptist, though, we should do this, not to bring attention to ourselves, but rather to steer men towards God. For example, it is very easy to take pride when an individual grasps fully the idea that you helped them to initially understand and which is subsequently taken forward to greater success. It's very easy to take pride in your own achievement and say "They learned everything they know from me." How much better to remember that they have their own, God-given talents which they have applied to the task; talents which the original instructor may not be blessed with. It is wrong to take credit for this achievement, but rather to relish in their success, because it is their achievement.

The four hundred year gap during which God didn't speak to his people, long though it is in their timescales, still seems like an eternity to us, in a society which many have claimed to be Godless. The doubter will point out that it is now some nineteen hundred and eighty years (or thereabouts) since God last spoke to mankind. When will he speak to us again?

The truth is, however, that God does speak to us, here and now, in church, in our homes and in our daily lives.

I finished writing my dissertation this week for a university course I have been taking the last two years on how our theology would have to be amended if we ever find alien life elsewhere in the universe. It's a right-riveting read, but it also provides us with a nice analogy for today. In the nineteen seventies, SETI, the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence project was undertaken. By systematically looking at the skies with radio telescopes the hope was that we would be able to

intercept signals from the stars and prove, once and for all, that there was intelligent life on planets other than the earth.

Nothing was heard. Now this may mean that there isn't life elsewhere. It may also mean that it exists but that they are either not transmitting (and remember that we only developed radio communication on the last 100 years or so). Or perhaps we are not tuned into the right frequency. We are not hearing the message, because we're not listening properly.

It's very similar with God. We need to listen correctly in order to hear his message. All too often our daily routine encroaches on our time to be alone with God and to listen to him. That listening time is known as prayer.

Now I don't pretend that praying is easy. Meaningful prayer is one of the hardest things to accomplish. We don't need to pray using long words - or even lots of them. What is needed is simple short statements, telling God of our hopes and fears; giving thanks to him for the wonders that he gives us and to make our requests to him. In many ways the actual words aren't as important as the intention, after all, as he told us, our Father in heaven knows what we need even before we ask it.

As I said earlier, it is difficult to find time in today's busy world to set aside for prayer. God understands the pressures you are under though and will listen to you. The only obligation is that you listen to him in return. Daily prayer was the norm for most of the Anglican Church's existence – Holy Communion was an infrequent treat. In fact, if you look in the Book of Common Prayer you'll find that the incumbent had to *give notice* when he would next be celebrating the Eucharist – it really was THAT irregular. Sadly, the Daily Office of morning and evening prayer has largely fallen out of fashion in favour of more regular communion services. However, starting this week, we're going to be saying the Daily office at 9am and at 3pm, Tuesday to Friday in the Lady Chapel to your left. It's a short service of 10 to 15 minutes duration and you are more than welcome to join us – taking a few minutes out of your daily routine to be in touch with Almighty God.

And during this and all of our prayer time, we should listen out for God speaking to us and follow what he has to teach us. However, a lot of the lessons he has for us have already been given to us. Most households have that information within them already. God has already provided the answers (or at least, guidelines) to our problems and they are contained within the Bible which some say to be the book most people have on their bookshelves but whom hardly anyone has ever read. This advent, then, let us aim to achieve two things; to spend more time reading the Word of God, and to spend more time in one to one communication with him.