

That Other Voice—Graham Turner book launch, 21 September 2017

I must have heard Beethoven's 9th Symphony a dozen times, but I'd never known what the words meant until I listened to a Prom the other night, which spelled out Schiller's words in sub-titles. Two lines struck me particularly. 'Do you sense your Creator, O world—You must seek him beyond the canopy of stars.'

Well, the people in this book don't go quite that far! They're of two kinds—those, like the majority of Jews, who believe that God stopped speaking totally at the end of the first five books of The Hebrew scriptures, and those who believe that God can communicate with us in something akin to a voice and that obeying that voice is the best way to run their lives.

A couple of examples just to show what kind of voice I'm talking about. First a fictional one, from one of CJ Sansom's Tudor thrillers! His hunchback hero, Mathew Shardlake is told by a monk that he can never become a priest because he is just a crookback churl". Not surprisingly Shardlake feels very cast down. As he ruefully contemplates his future, he believes Christ spoke to him. 'I heard a voice in my head,' he says. 'It came from inside me, but was not mine.'

The voice simply said 'You are not alone', and the peace and love which those words brought changed Shardlake's life forever—even though, hard as he prayed, he never heard that voice again. 'Perhaps,' he says, 'we only receive such a voice once in a lifetime. Many are not given even that.'

So a voice that came from inside, but was not his own. Let's take another example, this time not at all fictional. This is the experience of the present Dean of Christ Church in Oxford, Martyn Percey, only because, as he says himself, he was born in a home for

naughty girls in Blackburn, and then was given up for adoption. That's a first for Christ Church, I can tell you.

It happened when he, most unwillingly, went up to Durham where he'd been asked to go for ordination training. He didn't want to go, too far from London and so on. After an unhappy first interview with the principal, he stomped off into the Cathedral and had a furious verbal argument with God. Why, he demanded, was he being asked to come to Durham.

Then, he says, there came what he calls 'this strong inner voice, which was audible in my head and in no way external'—just like Matthew Shardlake. It said simply 'come and indicated that, if he obeyed, he would meet his wife-to-be there. He came out of a second interview and saw the photograph of the other ordinands. He looked at each of them and, when he came to his wife-to-be Emma, there came not a voice but a very clear thought, 'That's her, that's you wife-to-be.' Six months later, they were married, and still are.

When I asked Martyn what he made of that and of his other similar experiences he said that, at the time, he was not in a seeking mode at all. Like the slave captain John Newton, he was found without knowing that he was lost. Would he ever, I asked, deny the reality of those experiences? 'If you ask do I think I can hear a voice, yes I do. If you ask whether I believe it is God speaking through that inner voice, yes I do. It seems to come from nowhere, yet it comes from within. I don't mind if you call it a voice from Heaven.' That's very downright for an Anglican cleric of Martyn's seniority.

He believes that a great many people have had similar experiences though they don't always think of them in that way.

To hear that voice, Percy believes, simply requires us to pay attention to our inner landscape, to listen to our emotional intelligence, what used to be called wisdom. For

myself, I think it's also useful to consider our lives against the measure of the absolute moral standards that we see in Jesus's life.

So that is what I'm talking about—words which are heard inside but don't seem to come from us – often in a quite commanding way, though sometimes gently reassuring. The Catholics call them interior locutions.

Couple of things to be said about them. The first is that receiving them does not make us a member of some kind of spiritual elite, with a hot line to God. The second thing is that I found doing this book that it isn't only Christians who have such experiences. Muslims of the Sufi variety speak about receiving words, spiritual insights which come to them out of the blue and which they are sure come from God. And Zen Buddhists speak of having *satori*, a Japanese word for awakening which shows itself in a flooding into conscience of insights previously undreamt of.

So how can we be sure that these interior locutions come from God and are not just the confessions of our own minds? That's clearly rather important if we propose to obey what they suggest. Well, we can ask ourselves whether they match up to the absolute standards of Jesus and if we're still not sure, then we can always talk to trusted friends.

Rowan Williams gave me two pieces of advice when I talked to him about doing this book. First of all, have lots of stories. So it's full of, to me, fascinating stories. There's a Hindu orthopaedic surgeon who saved a little girl's life because of being told to do something during an operation which he'd never done before in 30 years of practice. There is an account of an extraordinary supper with the Dalai Lama's younger brother and his wife which makes it quite plain that he, at least, believes in God.

Rowan's second piece of advice: say what you believe yourself. So I also say something of my own personal experiences. They began a long time ago when I was in the RAF in

Singapore. At the time, I wasn't at all interested in religion, I was only really interested in two things—girls and cricket, and I wasn't particularly successful at either, though—since I was the only officer in the team—I was the captain.

Then one evening, a colleague invited me to have a cup of coffee with him in his quarters and suddenly asked if I'd like to listen to God. I was completely thrown and stuttered that I didn't believe in God. That, my friend replied blithely, doesn't affect His situation in the least; presented me with a piece of paper and a pencil; and suggested that I write down whatever came to me in the light of Jesus's absolute moral standards—of which he specified four—honesty, purity, unselfishness and love.

I expected nothing but, to my astonishment, clear thoughts which I'd never had before poured into my mind. First one, you are a dictator on the cricket field, apologise to your team. Second, when you went up to Oxford, you become a snob, write and apologise to your parents. Third, you treated three boys very badly at school. Write and apologise to each of them, and so on.

Now, these were all entirely new thoughts to me, I hadn't had them on my conscience or anything like that. At the end of that time of quiet, I had no doubt whatever that there was a force out there which cared about me and knew me better than I knew myself and which clearly wanted me to live in a different way. What's more, I somehow was quite ready to obey what I'd been told and to put my life into the hands of what I assumed was God. I can't account for any of it, but that is what happened. And, with all my weaknesses, that experience set me off on an entirely new road. I've been sitting in silence every morning for the last 50 plus years trying to listen to that other voice.

Mindfulness of course is the nostrum of the moment and I have no doubt that it is a great help to people in reducing their stress but that other voice offers a great deal more than that. It is my experience that seeking it and obeying it can lead us to what we were meant

to be all along. It's not just a panacea. Mindfulness is fine but it's only the hors d'oeuvre before the main course.

At one point, I stopped trying to listen to that other voice and went my own way again. That led to all kinds of problems—losing my temper with my children, fiddling my taxes, fiddling my expenses—and having a flirtation with another girl at the BBC. A good friend invited me to lunch and, predictably, suggested we have a quiet time at the end of it. The thoughts were just as crystal-clear as they had been before—go to the Inland Revenue and confess, tell the Director-General of the BBC and apologise to your wife about the other girl.

I did all of those things—interesting experiences, I promise you, and not without their humour. And after I'd told my wife about the other girl, with tears I have to say, the very next morning in my quiet time out of the blue came the unwelcome thought 'and now tell your mother in law about her'. That thought, I can assure you, certainly didn't come from me!