

Sermon Listen, Speak, Rest

Isaiah 50:4-9

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A wise old owl lived in an oak,
The more he saw the less he spoke
The less he spoke the more he heard.
Why can't we all be like that wise old bird? – unknown author

In the first few years of life, we're all taught to speak. In fact, it's an important developmental milestone, a sign that a child is developing normally. However, listening is an equally, if not more important skill that is often overlooked by parents, educators, and bosses.

In the passage that we read this morning from the prophet Isaiah, we have read words about the Servant of God and he is presented to us as the great listener.

This passage from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 50, is read in most churches of the world in this period of Holy Week, because the church has always understood these words in the light of the obedience and suffering of Jesus Christ.

And as he is our precious Lord, we as his followers can also learn some important lessons from what the prophet writes about the Servant of the Lord.

1 Listen and Speak

Our Lord Jesus is described here as someone who knows very well how to speak; he gives tired people exactly the right encouragement with his words.

Jesus knew when to speak - he answered the pharisees, the samaritan woman, Nicodemus... He was tough at times, soft at other moments, but he always spoke the right word. Unlike me. I am great at messing up. As many of us are.

When we teach in church about Jesus Christ, we often ponder his wise words. We look at them from every angle. What did he say? What did he mean? What can we learn from this?

We do not focus so much on the silence of Jesus, and on his listening skills. The prophet Isaiah shows us why our Lord was such a great speaker - why his words pierce hearts, why what he said can move us, change our lives.

The Lord has given me the tongue of those who are taught. ... Morning by morning he awakens; he awakens my ear to hear as those who are taught.

What was the secret of Jesus and his words? He was taught by God himself. He knew how to be silent, and listen, and receive wisdom before he gave it to others.

"The tongue of those that are taught." This means, the tongue of a disciple. Jesus was not born with an instructed tongue but was taught by the normal instruction methods of daily learning.

Maybe we have to think of how in Judaism the so called Yeshivas function. Students come day in day out to read the words of God, to study them, to discuss them, at the foot of a teacher.

Jesus had to learn what to say; he needed to be educated by God himself.

If He needed learning, what about us!?

Jesus came to give rest to those who are worn out. Our vocation as Christians is to do likewise. If Jesus needed daily learning at the feet of teachers - of God himself - in order to speak wisdom to others, how much more do we need to listen and learn.

St Ambrose, bishop of Milan wrote on the Duties of the Clergy, 1.2.5, saying:

What do we need to learn before everything else, but to be silent that we may be able to speak, lest my voice should condemn me... How many have I seen to fall into sin by speaking, but scarcely one by keeping silent; and so it is more difficult to know how to keep silent than how to speak.... a person is wise, then, who knows how to keep silent.

Someone wrote to me, "It is better to keep your mouth closed and have people think you are a fool, than to open it and remove all doubt!"

It is the silent learning, especially from the Word of God, that can make us wise.

It is a good idea to read the Word of God each morning and to learn from God. Listening first makes us better able to act and speak in the turmoil of the day. As Jesus did.

"Morning by morning the Lord awakens my ear, to hear as those who are taught," the Servant of the Lord said. His learning was not some sort of fate, but his own choice. We face the same choice. Whom do we listen to? What words fill our minds?

"The Lord God has opened my ear", the Servant of the Lord says. In the Old Testament, if a slave was about to be set free by his owner, that slave could prefer to stay with his master. This is what we read in Exodus 21:6:

If the slave plainly says, 'I love my master [...]; I will not go out as a free man,' then his master shall bring him to God, then he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him permanently.

2 Price of obedience

The Lord God has opened my ear - I do think there are good reasons to think that these words refer to that ancient habit of literally piercing the ear of a slave. Because the next words of the Servant of the Lord are, "I was not rebellious, I turned not backward."

These are words related to servanthood. Voluntarily Jesus served God; As we saw in Philippians 2, he did not hold on to the blessings of being divine but he became human. As Moses, living freely, he went into Egypt to set his people free.

And the words of the Servant of God also remind us of the servanthood of Israel in the desert, after they left Egypt.

Israel was supposed to be God's servant, but they were rebellious and they nagged about wanting to go back to Egypt. Jesus here says: "Lord God, I am your servant, I am not rebellious, I do not want to turn back."

In Jesus we see the new Israel; the true Israel, the true Servant of God. Taught by God to be a faithful servant. Taught by God to speak the Word of God to all people.

Now that may be your desire, to serve God and to speak his words of encouragement to other people, but be careful. Obedience to God comes at a price. Surely, the benefits are amazing - lasting into eternity. But it has a price tag attached.

St Makarios, one of our Egyptian desert father, wrote in his First Syriac epistles 7:

Now if God wanted to accept and to lower himself to such sufferings, dishonours and humiliations, then no matter how much you humble yourself, you will never resemble your Lord in this. God for your sake humbled himself, but you for your own sake, do not humble yourself. You are proud and puffed up.

Not nice to hear, but often true. If our Lord humbled himself so much for our sake, how can we not be humble people! Humble towards God and also towards each other.

Also, It is no coincidence that immediately after the Servant of the Lord spoke of listening to God and speaking the word of God, the focus shifts to perseverance and persecution.

"I will not turn back", he says, meaning, I will continue my life's work as God gave to me, his servant.

I will bring my people out of slavery into the promised land, whatever the cost.

The people Jesus came to guide out of slavery were not much impressed. When He entered on his donkey into Jerusalem, they were still praising him. A week later, the situation had changed:

The Servant of God gives his back to those who strike,
his cheeks to those who pull out his beard;
He does not hide his face from disgrace and spitting.

Here we recognise the attitude of Jesus during the last 24 hours of his life. He was despised, beaten, spit at. As the "reward" for listening to God and obeying God.

He was too much light in a dark world. The evil treatment Jesus suffered was not because of any wrong he did; it was because unlike all other people, he obeyed God. And that, friends, is too much for us, human beings, to bear. It makes us look too sinful.

You really desire to follow Jesus, as a listener to God and a speaker of God? Think twice. Being a disciple of our Lord is not for the fainthearted. It needs humility, and perseverance. The reward is supreme but the price tag may shock you.

3 God is with me

When Jesus sat himself on the donkey to ride into Jerusalem, the stage was set. He had listened to God, he had obeyed, and now he had to persevere. The people were shouting hosanna, but Jesus knew that soon they would shout crucify him.

How could Jesus stand such trials in life? How can we stand our trials in life? Isaiah 50:7-9

For the Lord GOD helps me; therefore I have not been confounded; therefore I have set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who is my adversary? Let him come near to me. Behold, the Lord GOD helps me; who will declare me guilty? Behold, all of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up.

The terminology used here is like that in a trial-scene. That was also the situation Jesus found himself in during his last 24 hours. Totally alone he stood in front of the Sanhedrin, in front of the people, and then before Pontius Pilate. He stood accused in court - but God was his lawyer and his judge. God stood by him through the Holy Spirit, and God, in the end, vindicated Jesus.

Jesus made his face like flint. Like hard stone. This means, he accepted his cruel fate without blinking an eye; In the end, his enemies were to be ashamed and he would be justified by his resurrection from the dead.

The servant of God knows: let anyone accuse me - but the Lord will help me.

This faith in God was what made Jesus into our perfect saviour. This same faith upholds us as well.

Conclusion

Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ brought us back to God again through Holy Week. He listened to God, therefore, what He spoke was the Word of God, and he did not turn back in spite of the humiliation and the troubles that this choice to serve God made.

He is not only our Saviour but also our example. He shows us how as servants of our Lord, we have to immerse ourselves in the word and the will of God.

This needs discipline. If we can watch TV three hours per day, or talk with friends, or read great novels, then we certainly also have the time to read the Word of God, and take it to heart, every day. Even if only for 10 minutes. How else to learn from God if we do not listen.

If we listen, he can use us to be his mouthpiece, to encourage people, to help them, to bless them. But first you need to fill your mind and heart with the will of God.

The price tag may be hard to accept. Serving God comes with a price. But the reward is similar to the vindication of Jesus Christ. The road to Jerusalem was hard, but resurrection, being reunited with the Father and the Holy Spirit, was the eternal hope of Jesus. And that is the joy of our hope as well.

Amen