



## Lesson Nine: When you meet with God...speak the truth.

### Reflection/Discussion

We have been doing a lot of waiting on God in these exercises in the expectation that God will speak to us, but how does God speak to us, and how can we know if it is him who is speaking? There are many ways in which God can and will speak to us. The most straightforward way is through the Bible. Whilst there are many issues in the Bible that we can pick apart and argue over, nevertheless the character of God is woven through the stories in Scripture and it is this character that we need to discover for ourselves. So as we read or study the Bible with humble hearts, God reveals himself to us as one who loves us and calls us into relationship with him. Another way God speaks is by giving us a thought which seems in some way to be different from the regular thoughts we have. It may be a Bible verse which stands out from the others, or simply a thought that seems to come from nowhere yet has some power attached to it. God also speaks to us by giving us a deeper sense or awareness about what is truly going on in our life, or in the lives of those around us. Things become obvious to us when for others it is not so obvious. The prophets of the Old Testament had this well developed sense. They looked at what was going on around them and as they looked God opened their eyes to see how things were going to end up for the people of Israel. They were also known as Seers! Other ways of hearing from God include through dreams (this happens a number of times in the Bible), through pictures (where people see something in their imagination - very similar to dreams) or, in the context of physical healing, through feeling the physical symptoms of someone else that God is wanting to heal.

In all these ways (and others) there is a need for discernment. This is why we need to grow as Christians within a community of people who are seeking after God. Some will know the Bible better than we do and can explain it to us so we understand what it is saying. Others will have a deeper knowledge of the heart of God and can help us hear his words of love for us. Others can point us towards the majesty of God and his call on us to live holy lives. Together we learn to listen to God, and by listening, learn to discern that faint whisper that the noise of this world can block out but never silence. This reminds me of Habakkuk 2: 20 which says, *"The LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him."*

In what different ways has God spoken to you?

### Teaching

Matthew 6: 12 *"And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors."*

Luke 11: 4a *"Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us."*

## Our starting point...

In his book, *School for Prayer*, Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh writes this: *“What we must start with, if we wish to pray, is the certainty that we are sinners in need of salvation, that we are cut off from God and that we cannot live without Him and that all we can offer God is our desperate longing to be made such that God will receive us, receive us in repentance, receive us with mercy and with love. And so from the outset prayer is really our humble ascent towards God, a moment when we turn Godwards, shy of coming near, knowing that if we meet Him too soon, before His grace has had time to help us to be capable of meeting Him, it will be judgement. And all we can do is to turn to Him with all the reverence, all the veneration, the worshipful adoration, the fear of God of which we are capable, with all the attention and earnestness which we may possess, and ask Him to do something with us that will make us capable of meeting Him face to face, not for judgement, nor for condemnation, but for eternal life.”*

The Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh is an Orthodox priest, and this can be seen in the way he writes. But the main thing I take from this passage is the idea that our walk with God involves a life-long process of being transformed ever more into his likeness. That is not an easy thing, especially when our natural inclination is often to go the other way. But the process has to begin with an acknowledgement of the truth about ourselves in relation to God. In a hospital the doctors need to know the truth about what is wrong with us before they can treat us. They may remove bandages or use an x-ray to see where treatment is needed, but either way the problem has to be revealed before it can be dealt with. In the same way, it is only as we acknowledge the truth about ourselves that God is able to begin the healing/transforming process.

## In search of the truth...

Discovering the truth about ourselves is difficult. God knows the truth about each of us, but when we look at ourselves our judgement is distorted by our fears, or pride, or problems with our self-esteem. We can see ourselves in a very negative light, considering our every-day sins as clear examples of how wicked and twisted we are. Or we can see ourselves in an overly positive light, playing down the significance of our sinful behaviour as being minor imperfections that affect everyone and needn't concern us too much. Both these attitudes get in the way of God being able to do his forgiving, healing and redeeming work in us. This is because those who see themselves in a negative light might consider themselves too bad to be forgiven, whilst those who downplay their sins do not consider it necessary to come to God in repentance. Either way, like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:8), they are more comfortable hiding away from God than walking out into the light of truth. In John 3: 19–21 we read, *“Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. All those who do evil hate the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But those who live by the truth come into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.”*

This tendency to hide the truth about ourselves can be seen in our human relationships as well as our relationship with God. For example, in the hostel for recovering alcoholics where I used to work, I knew a resident who gave in to the temptation of buying and consuming an alcoholic drink. The rules of the hostel said that this was not allowed and he knew the rules. Up to this point the resident had obeyed the rules and fitted in to the life of the hostel really well, but now he had had

a 'slip up'. At first the staff were not aware that this had happened. We only found out the next day when we discovered that the resident, feeling too bad about himself to admit what he had done and seek help, had climbed out of a window at night and left the hostel.

It was pride that made this hostel resident act in this way towards the staff, and it's the same pride that makes us slink away from God when we do something wrong. What is required is the strength to be humble, to defy that desire to leave the place that it is best for us to be. In the case of the alcoholic, the best place for him to be was in the hostel where he was in a supportive and alcohol free environment. For us, when we do something wrong, the best place for us to be is in the light of truth before God, but pride (or shame) will lure us into the shadows. Of course, the reality is that we are sinning in one way or another on a regular basis. God knows that. He knew you and I would do so from before we were born! That was why he needed a plan for saving us from the inclination to do wrong or selfish things. If we had to wait until we had stopped sinning altogether before coming to God in prayer, the time would never be right to pray. Instead, it is when we have just consciously sinned that we most need to pray!

### Walking towards the light...

A life without repentance is one in which we are walking away from the light, and into a deeper darkness. But as we repent, so we turn ourselves around and walk towards the growing light. The direction we are going will affect both our relationship with God and with other people. In fact we cannot disconnect the two. After King David had committed adultery with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11), he says in Psalm 51: 4, *"Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight."* That is an interesting statement to make considering he had stolen the wife of Uriah the Hittite, and then had Uriah murdered. Uriah was one of David's thirty warriors who had been with him through thick and thin, and at this time he was a member of David's trusted personal bodyguard (2 Samuel 23: 39). Such a huge betrayal of one so loyal was surely a great sin against that person, yet David saw this also, and ultimately, as a crime against God. This was because both the relationship and Uriah were created by, and belonged to, God.

Notice that at first David tried to hide the truth of what he had done, so God had to send the prophet Nathan to bring the truth out into the open. I wonder if David was relieved that finally the truth was out! He was a man after God's own heart (Acts 13: 22), and therefore probably felt the heavy burden of his secret actions. As so often happens in life, once Nathan had begun the process of truth-telling, so more truth was revealed as David was now able to declare, *"I have sinned against the Lord."* In response to this act of repentance Nathan announced on God's behalf, *"The Lord has taken away your sin. You are not going to die. But because by doing this you have made the enemies of the Lord show utter contempt, the son born to you will die"* (2 Samuel 12: 13 – 14).

What we do matters! Yes, we can be forgiven for the wrong things that we have done, and so continue our journey of transformation into the likeness of Christ. But our wrong actions will still have consequences for both us and others which may last for the rest of our life on earth. Just as the good things we do become a positive legacy for our future, so the bad things we do create a negative legacy. Sin is serious and the truth about it needs to be understood. Jesus said, *"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free"* (John 8: 31-32). So it is when we live as disciples of Jesus that we will discover the truth, and the result of this discovery is not bondage to our sin but freedom from it! But Jesus goes even

further when he says, *“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”* (John 14: 6). In Jesus there is no darkness. In him there is only truth in its fullness and love in its purity. The way to life and true freedom is through the truth: the truth that is God, the truth that is Jesus, and the truth that we also may become as we walk in his light. There is nothing to be gained by living our life in the shadow of lies!

## Exercise

When King David sinned he tried to hide it from others, and may have even tried to hide it from himself. Our hearts can be very deceitful, even to ourselves. But God undermined his efforts by sending his prophet Nathan to reveal the truth to David and others in his court, and then the sin could be dealt with and the relationship between him and God restored. Occasionally God uses someone like Nathan to stir up our conscience or help us see the truth, but the regular way he does this is through the work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, *“But I tell you the truth: it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you....But when he, the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth”* (John 16: 7–13). This week you are going to focus on the truth, asking the Spirit to *“guide you into all truth.”*

So having got yourself comfortable, quietened your thoughts and prayed some of the other prayers we have looked at in previous lessons, spend some time reflecting on the relationships God has given you with friends, family, fellow students or work colleagues and ask him, by his Holy Spirit, to reveal the truth about those relationships. Perhaps there is someone whose feelings you have hurt, or someone you have an unresolved dispute with. Perhaps there is someone you have neglected, or someone you could have helped but didn't. Perhaps there is someone who needs your friendship but you have kept away from them. Perhaps there is someone you need to forgive! Remember that forgiving someone does not mean you then have to be best friends with them – that may not be appropriate. However, it does mean that you choose no longer to have bad thoughts or feelings about them, and instead you wish only good things for them. This forgiving is only for yourself and God to know about. It is to set you free from the bitter thoughts and feelings that will continue to damage you if you do not forgive. You should not tell the other person that they have been forgiven unless you feel sure that they will be blessed by knowing this!

### Exercise in brief:

- 1) Pray – give God this time you have set aside for him.
- 2) Sit still and spend a moment becoming attentive to God.
- 3) Ask God to help you become a person who loves him, yourself and others more.
- 4) Ask God to place on your heart the burdens he has on his heart for you to bear.
- 5) Ask God to help you empty your hands so that you can receive whatever he wants to give you.
- 6) Ask God to reveal the truth about any of your relationships with other people where repentance is needed.
- 7) Close the exercise with a prayer of thanks.

## Encouragement

*Andrew writes...*

Children watch their parents and are greatly influenced by what they do! Our children once found an old electric Go Kart in a skip and they asked the owner if they could have it. He told them it was broken, and it had no charger, but he allowed them to take it anyway. The children found a charger and then tried to charge it up, but it still didn't work. Having watched adults do this, they told me that they would pray and "lay hands on it." My wife and I were dubious about the Go Kart ever working, but in faith they took it outside and prayed over it. Low and behold it worked, and gave them hours of fun! Doesn't God want to do all sorts of things if only we have the faith to ask?

*James writes...*

Most recently God has been answering my prayers at work. I have been organising a conference which is something I tend to find really stressful. I would normally work and work, and ignore God apart from the odd mention of it to him. This time I really tried to commit the conference to him in prayer. I did, of course, continue to work hard on the organisation of the conference. However there were various things that I remembered to do, and organisational problems that could have caused considerable difficulty, but none of them did. It all went really well and I have been getting lots of positive feedback about the conference. As I write this out I can see that you could attribute the success of this conference to me and the team helping to organise it. I can't point to any miraculous event where God saved the conference from not working. All I know is that I really committed the conference to God in prayer and it was successful, and I believe that God was at the heart of that success.

## Sayings of the Desert Fathers/Mothers

Abba Matoes, *"The nearer a man draws to God, the more he sees himself a sinner. It was when Isaiah the prophet saw God, that he declared himself 'a man of unclean lips.'"* (Isaiah 6:5)