

Tuning In To God: Expecting Unexpected Voices - 24th September 2023

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[0 : 00] So we're continuing, as Matt said, with our series, Tuning Into God this morning. Last week, Matt was sharing his thoughts and reflection on what does God sound like?

And if you remember, we had that beautiful melody, didn't we, of sunshine on leaf filling the air. And this morning, we're going to spend some time looking at unexpected encounters and unexpected voices that God can use to speak into our lives.

Whether it's wise words to help guide and encourage us in our lives, or whether it's spurring us into action, or nudging us to reflect on the way we look at others and the world around us, and then understand our faith.

I think we know, don't we, that God is at work in the whole of his creation. With all sorts of people, and in all sorts of places. In John's Gospel, Jesus says this, My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.

Now, I know the context of this was in response to the accusations that Jesus faced about performing miracles on Sabbath. But then again, we've heard, haven't we, that every day is a church day.

[1 : 23] But it also, I think, alludes to the fact that God is constantly working all around us, and sometimes in those we might least expect.

So we shouldn't really be surprised when he shows up in conversations that we didn't think he would, or in people who, you know, turn out to be something altogether different from what we first thought.

Okay, it's funny how sometimes we pigeonhole people, isn't it, you know? Sometimes people who are complete strangers and may be very different to us say something that makes us think twice. And it can be, I think, a real measure of our humility and grace to put ourselves in a place where we can actually hear and receive that. Now, you might remember a few years back a TV series called *Rev* starring Tom Hollander and then little-known Olivia Colman.

Anybody remember that? Okay, yeah. Now, I know it's not everybody's cup of tea, okay? But I thought, I actually thought it was really well written, and it brought a sort of a gritty, humorous realism to the life of an inner-city vicar, played by Tom Hollander.

[2 : 51] And underneath it all was a strong message of hope and inclusion. And not surprisingly, maybe, a number of clergy actually contributed to the scripts, drawing on their own experiences in ministry.

So, just to get us thinking about this notion of unexpected voices, I thought I would share with you a short clip of Adam, that's Tom Hollander, sitting down with one of his parishioners, Colin, played by Steve Evitz, who is a hard-drinking, lost soul you can't quite trust.

But deep down, you know he has the potential to be good. And it's through his gritty, irreverent banter that God uses him to remind Adam and us that we aren't perfect either.

So, here is Adam talking with Colin about his upcoming baptism. I should have done it years ago, really. What will I feel, apart from a wet head?

You'll feel that God reached out to you with his love. What does that feel like, then? Well, on a good day, that feels like heaven. I feel at peace.

[4 : 12] Yeah. I feel a real sense of connection to others. Yeah. An absence of anything bad. And there are moments when I almost feel like I'm surfing on a great wave of hope and love.

A bit like doing ecstasy, then? No. And most importantly, you'll feel part of a huge, loving family. So it's exactly like doing ecstasy, then?

No, it isn't. What I'm talking about is a permanent spiritual state that underpins my entire being. What you're talking about is chemical, temporary, illegal and almost certainly harmful. Have you ever taken any drugs? No. I smoked dope once. That's great, isn't it? Have you ever had any? No. Oh, you've got to have had them. You'd love it. No, Colin, I'm not interested in any of that. What about those Mexican priests who get closer to God by sucking on a cactus? Peyote? Yeah, they're very respected, those priests. [5 : 16] And they're always off the tits. Well, mind-watering substances aren't that big in the Church of England. Apart from drink. Or vicars drink loads. And you smoke fags.

Them ones are fine. No, they're not. Colin's no angel in disguise, is he? But God is at work through all sorts of people.

In all sorts of ways. And if we'll listen, that can speak into our lives. Matt was sharing last week how when he prays, he gets a sense of God's leading.

You know, the way he described it, I think, was it's like a gentle whisper. And the voice in his head is always calm and speaks plainly and clearly with no ums and no ahs.

You know, and I do occasionally get that. I think for me, though, you know, more often than not, it's about little God nudges that give me a gentle push.

[6 : 20] You know, go and have a chat with them. Or why don't you go and help out there? Or, you know, why don't you get involved with that or this or give this person a ring or see if they need some help or encouragement.

And I'm sort of guessing that for a lot of us, it's that sort of quiet, you know, low-key way that God, through his spirit, finds his way, often gently, not always, but often gently into our lives.

And maybe you might use different words. You describe it as a feeling or as a stirring in your spirit or a pull towards something or someone or maybe an insight or something that unsettles you or a thought or a picture that kind of leaves a lasting impression.

And, of course, some of those nudges have important implications. And we need to test them and discern them. You know, how does this line up with what Jesus reveals about himself in the Bible? And even if it's the right thing, is now the right time? All those sort of perplexing questions that we have to wrestle with.

[7 : 43] But generally, in my experience, these nudges seem to be how God's spirit often gets through to us. But, of course, with so much noise and distraction going on around us, it's possible, isn't it, to miss them?

And sometimes they're so obvious that we are just oblivious because we're just not expecting that. There's a lovely story from the 1960s about a man in West Berlin who worked in the eastern sector of that divided city.

And he would ride his bicycle to work each day with a bag of sand on the back. And each day, the border guard at the checkpoint, who was more than a little suspicious that he was actually smuggling contraband through the checkpoint, he would meticulously inspect the man and the bag of sand.

But he never, ever found anything. And after weeks and weeks of this kind of daily routine, the exasperated guard, who was certain that he was up to something, reasoned with the man, telling him that he would let him smuggle whatever it was that he had in the sand, if he would just let him in on the secret and tell him what it was that he was smuggling through.

And the man gave a sly little grin and drew a little closer and whispered, Bicycles.

[9 : 26] A different one every day. It's great, isn't it? I wonder how often Jesus is up to something right under our noses and we don't really pick up on it because we're not really looking in the right places.

Jesus' parables, I know I've kind of spoken about that before, but Jesus' parables are a bit like that too. He never really gives straight answers, does he, through them. And I think that's because the kingdom of God is not supposed to be easy to understand, if that makes sense.

It's not supposed to be obvious. It's almost the opposite of that. It's supposed to be intriguing.

Something that we really have to sit down and think about and reflect on and allow it to sort of sink in and challenge us and maybe grab our imagination to entice us into letting go of some of the things that we thought were important.

But on reflection, maybe not. It's about changing our priorities, it's about changing us so that we might imagine a different way of seeing the world and seeing ourselves and how we're connected to

one another.

And I guess, like most things, that takes time and a willingness to look in the less obvious places to hear and see what God is up to.

[11:10] If we look at some of the encounters in the Bible, alongside all the kind of, you know, distinct proclamations that God makes, I suspect there's an awful lot of more subtle nudges going on.

So this morning, we're going to take a look at an encounter found in the book of Acts that seems to be sort of guided by these God nudges but takes quite an unexpected turn.

So the Apostle Paul and his companions Silas have begun their second missionary journey travelling throughout Galatia to encourage some of the churches that Paul's established on his first journey.

And they get to Derbe and then Lystra and then something really quite unexpected happens. Their plans go up in smoke and they end up in Philippi encountering an extraordinary woman named Lydia.

So, reading from the book of Acts, chapter 16, from verse 6. And there's a lot of name places in this. Okay, so bear with me.

[12:30] Paul and his companions travelled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia.

When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them, so they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas.

During that night, Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, come over to Macedonia and help us.

After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

And from Troas, we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothras. And the next day, we went on to Neapolis. And from there, we travelled to Philippi, a Roman colony, and the leading city of that district of Macedonia.

[13:36] And we stayed there several days. On the Sabbath, we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer.

We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. And one of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira, named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth.

And she was a worshipper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptised, she invited us to her home.

If you consider me a believer in the Lord, she said, come and stay at my house. And she persuaded us. I don't know what you make of that passage when you've read it in the past, you know.

But to me, it reads like, Paul had one thing in mind, and God had quite something else in mind. You know, we know that Paul had visited the cities in southern Galatia, okay, up on that muck, in the sort of top right hand corner up there, to see how they were doing.

[14:50] And after that, he would have likely headed west, or he wanted to headed west, towards Ephesus on the coast. And the spirit says, no, don't preach the good news in Asia.

You know, Paul will get to Ephesus eventually, but not now. So instead, they head off north, and you can sort of see, can't you, there's a sort of meandering arrow that goes back up north into Bithynia.

And they're probably, they're probably heading for Nicaea. And God says, no, don't go there either. And whatever they must have been thinking, and I'm sure they were wondering what was going on, Paul and his companions were clearly paying attention to the nudges that were coming from God.

And so they sort of left to wander, aimlessly it seems, for quite a while, all the way down to the port in Troas, without doing any ministry.

And they pick up a new ministry partner there, we know, obviously Luke, who writes this account. I wonder, do you think it might have come as a relief to Paul to then experience an actual, an actual vision?

[16:14] Okay, at this point, you know, a dream of a Macedonian man? It's a bit more solid ground, isn't it, than a nudge. Only Paul won't meet a man, he'll meet a woman.

And she won't be from Macedonia, she'll be from Thyatira, which is in Asia, which essentially makes her a migrant, and quite possibly an outsider in the community in Philippi.

Oh, and by the way, she's not Jewish. You know, but apart from that, it all goes according to plan. Now, it turns out, doesn't look like it has enough Jewish men to form a quorum, which was necessary for a synagogue.

So there's no synagogue, which would normally have been Paul's sort of first port of call. Instead, they end up down by the river. That's interesting, isn't it?

What was it Jesus said? Rivers of living water that will flow within. By that, he meant the Holy Spirit, God. So the Holy Spirit, it seems, is not so much nudging Paul and his companions to, you know, literal events that will unfold, but rather pushing things along to get people to places and into situations where new and exciting things can happen that energizes the kingdom to spread out into the world.

[17 : 58] And so Paul and his companions meet Lydia and her household and the other women down by the river. And there's not a man in sight. Again, it's really strange in a patriarchal society.

These women appear to have kind of set up for themselves some sort of alfresco prayer house down by the river. It's all very unexpected.

And I wonder, I wonder what all this says to us. It's like Lydia is never the person you set out to meet.

And neither is she in the place you expect to find her. But unless you meet her, you're going to miss out on so much of what God is actually up to.

And what of Lydia? Well, we know God opened her heart and she received Jesus and was baptized. She was most likely a woman of means trading in purple cloth.

[19 : 05] And given that, she may even have had some connection to the imperial court in Rome. But, you know, we don't know that. But we do know that her entire household, slaves, servants, children, if she had any, were also baptized.

And what that means is that she was in a position like the head of any Roman household to make lifestyle choices because they were economically and socially dependent upon her.

And the little that she does say I think goes straight to the heart of the matter before Paul and his companions. If you consider me a believer in the Lord, come and stay at my home.

It's an offer of generous hospitality, isn't it? But she also knows full well that they have no synagogue because they have no men.

And so will the rules in this new Jesus movement mirror the rules in the Jewish community? Hospitality. And her question to them sort of puts it out all on the line.

[20 : 27] Is she really now a new creation? And if so, will they receive her hospitality? Will they accept her as an equal and as their benefactor?

I think she's got some chutzpah, some guts. And when Paul and Cyrus are preparing to leave Philippi, they go to Lydia's house.

That's where they go. Don't go to the jailer's house. Remember the story kind of later on. And as the head of that household where the church met, she was the de facto church leader.

And with no reason to think that Paul didn't acknowledge her as such, and so plants the first church in Europe in Philippi.

I mean, I don't know what you think, but I think it's ironic, isn't it, that Lydia originally came from Asia, where Paul was forbidden to go by the Holy Spirit.

[21 : 36] And as Paul does then sort of stumble or venture into Europe, what will become Europe, the first person to come to faith, is an immigrant Asian woman.

And I can't think for a moment that that's what Paul was expecting. But he acts on the nudges and he adopts almost like a theology of embrace, meeting these unexpected strangers.

And I think it must have been a challenge. But he embraces them into the church, and of course that echoes, doesn't it, Jesus' ministry of inclusion of those that were so often excluded, whether they were women or Samaritans or lepers or tax collectors or whoever.

Paul didn't choose Lydia. God chose Lydia.

But by embracing that choice, Paul allowed, I think, a space to be opened up in his heart. And his vision of the kingdom got an awful lot bigger.

[22 : 53] other, I wonder this week in the not so obvious, the not so holy encounters that we have with other people, if we might make space for something new to happen, so that God's kingdom might spread out a little further.

What if we took the time to tune in to those God nudges, open to hear from the unexpected and often unheard voices and allowed that to challenge or to change our understanding of what it means to follow Jesus.

I pray over these coming weeks and months that we might meet Lydia and that they might nudge us outside our comfort zones.

You never know quite where things might lead, do you? But we'll never know if we don't step out. New directions that the kingdom takes.

So may we encounter the God of love in the most unexpected places. Amen.