

Hearing Voices

171st Annual Convention

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Feast of C.S. Lewis

Several years ago I was invited to be an observer from the Episcopal Church at a major conference of Roman Catholic bishops in San Francisco. As it happened the gathering had been called to receive the Roman Church's newly published Ceremonial of Bishops, and I was included as a representative from the ecumenical community, partly I think because I was involved in planning a conference for bishops of the Episcopal Church on the topic of the distinctive nature of the ministry of bishops. In any case, there we were, hundreds of Roman Catholic prelates and a couple of sheepish Episcopalians, gathered together in a hotel conference room for the opening session ... led by some functionary from Rome as I remember it. We settled in to our seats, the introductions were made, the topic laid out for our consideration and then ... gosh, it seemed as though there was some problem with the sound system in the room. It was like interference was making its way through the wireless mikes. There were other voices you could hear, fairly faint, but just loud enough to be really distracting. The presenters carried on as though it wasn't bothering them, but I was getting more and more annoyed – it was like a lecture in the background competing with the one on the stage in front of us. Where was the hotel staff? I mean, this was a major conference center and a gathering of some importance, why couldn't the sound system people do something? Couldn't they hear it?

I was getting so peeved I could hardly hear anything that was being said from the front of the room when suddenly a woman sitting behind me leaned forward, tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Would you please turn that off?" And with a sickening start I realized with a jolt who the competing electronic voice belonged to. It was me. Somehow the little tape player I used to record verbal notes had been jostled into action in my briefcase. The "on" switch got pressed and my own voice was the one droning on and on to my consternation and that of the people around me in the auditorium. I quickly apologized, turned off the ridiculous machine, and resisted the inclination to slink from the room in disgrace ... first of course stopping to genuflect and confess my sins to the Archbishop of Cincinnati.

This little drama has stayed fresh in my memory for a variety of reasons, but most helpfully I think because it reminds me of just how easy it is to go off the rails in my prayer and discernment. It is so easy to be listening intently to what I presume is God and instead be hearing only my own interior monologue, mistaking it for the still small voice that's the genuine article. God seems to delight in hiddenness, obscurity, mystery. And for very good reason. Jesus said it to his anxious friends, "It's good that I go away. If I didn't leave you, you could turn me into another idol, set me up in a shrine and keep me there safely out of the way." I love to ask confirmation candidates if they can explain the Trinity to me. It's just fun to watch the expression on their faces ... like deer in the episcopal headlights. When we talk about the baptismal covenant it's important to let them know that the Trinity is a doctrinal formulation that doesn't make any ordinary sense at all ... on purpose. That's what makes it such a useful and centrally important doctrine of the faith – it keeps us from turning it into an idol. No doctrine, no

formula no idea about God can ever capture God. Religious certainty is a poor substitute for a living relationship with the God who has so much more to teach us than we can imagine.

That's why stories, art, poetry, music have occupied such a central place in the life of our church. Jesus didn't issue elaborate doctrinal formulations to his friends and followers; he told them stories. They sang together. They fed people. They healed the sick. He showed them how to love unconditionally. Jesus told them again and again it didn't matter nearly as much what they thought about God as what they did because of God. It is far too easy to mistake our ideas about God for the true and living presence of the Holy One. Religion is often a convenient substitute for a living faith.

I think that's something blessed Clive Staples Lewis knew in his bones and has to hand on to us. The director of youth ministries in my last parish had a quotation from C.S. Lewis tacked up on a board in his office. It's a poem titled, "Footnote to All Prayers." Lewis writes this:

*He whom I bow to only knows to whom I bow
When I attempt the ineffable Name, murmuring Thou,
And dream of Pheidian fancies and embrace in heart
Symbols (I know) which cannot be the thing Thou art.
Thus always, taken at their word, all prayers blaspheme
Worshipping with frail images a folk-lore dream,
And all men in their praying, self-deceived, address
The coinage of their own unquiet thoughts, unless
Thou in magnetic mercy to Thyself divert
Our arrows, aimed unskilfully, beyond desert;
And all men are idolators, crying unheard
To a deaf idol, if Thou take them at their word.
Take not, O Lord, our literal sense. Lord, in thy great
Unbroken speech our limping metaphor translate.*

My friends we are living in a fearful and anxious age. We live in a time when competing claims of absolute truth clamor for our attention. Regimes throughout the world preach their

political and ethnic fundamentalisms. In the name of various gods we violate one another and the earth itself. Even in the church there are those who want to claim that God has spoken with unmistakable clarity to them alone and woe to those who don't see it the same way... and this is true on all sides of the current theological debates. But you know the opposite of faith is not doubt, it is certainty. The First Letter of Peter, written quite likely to a group of newly baptized Christians, tells us that it's not certainty that saves us. It is faith. Love. Trust in the infinite goodness of the Living God who will reveal the hearts of all on the last day. In this diocese, in this church let us be a people listening not to our own monologues, but to the cries of the poor, to the lament of the brokenhearted, to the anger of the marginalized, to the weeping of those who mourn. There, there we finally have a reliable chance of hearing the voice of the One who has made us and is remaking us into the living image of Christ. Sisters and brothers, let us listen, and when we hear the voice of Jesus, for God's sake -- for God's sake, and our own salvation let us follow.

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