

Preparation

- The leader of the group will need to prepare in advance a tape or CD with snippets of some popular and well known songs or music that the group is likely to recognise. About 10 will be plenty, but make sure they are not too long (just a few seconds of the chorus or the introduction).
- The leader will also need to take along enough seashells so that everyone in the group has one.

There is so much distracting noise around us, so many things interrupting our lives and vying for our attention. Adverts on television are louder than the programmes they separate as a way of grabbing our attention. Clocks tick; traffic goes past, dogs bark, children play, the radio sings out – so many external noises, the hubbub of life.

Then there are the noises on the inside – the song that you can't get out of your head, the thoughts you can't ignore, nagging worries, hurt, anger - all the things you have to do tomorrow....

It's no wonder that we can sometimes find it hard to hear the voice of God with all this noise.

Activity - 'Bits & Pieces'

Use the tape or CD that was prepared for the group. Give each person a pen and piece of paper and let them know how many snippets of music they need to listen out for. Then play the music and see if people can guess what the songs are.

It can sometimes be hard to distinguish what is going on when we only hear a small snippet. Some songs have similar introductions or melodies and we can easily be mistaken when we don't hear something in its entirety.

This is not just true in music but in all things that we hear. It can lead to some highly embarrassing situations when we mishear things!

Discussion

- Have you ever had an embarrassing or funny experience caused when something got misheard?
- What things make it more likely that we will mishear?

So if it can be hard enough to hear what other people are trying to say to us, how can we possibly hear the voice of God? We read in the Bible about God having one-to-one conversations with folk. Or we hear Christian speakers say how God said this and that to them directly.

Discussion

- What's your reaction when you hear of this sort of thing? What would you say to persuade someone that God speaks, or doesn't speak, to us today?
- Have you ever heard the voice of God? If so, what were the circumstances and how did it happen?

God created us as individuals and he realises that we all listen and hear in different ways. Therefore he chooses to speak to us in different ways too. We're going to look at the experiences of God communicating with two people whose stories are in the Bible – Elijah and Samuel.

Elijah was fleeing from Jezebel who wanted him dead. Lonely and discouraged he started to feel sorry for himself and even prayed that he might die. God wanted to speak to him, yet in his state of self-pity he could not immediately hear.

Read 1 Kings 19: 9-13

Discussion

- Elijah heard God speak at 'Horeb, the mountain of God'. Is it easier for you to hear God in some places more than others? Why?
- What was the significance of the earthquake, wind and fire? Why did God send them if He was not in them?
- What benefits were there in God speaking to Elijah through a whisper?

Another famous incident of God speaking involved the prophet Samuel as a boy, although this time there were no tremendous forces of nature used to grab his attention.

Read 1 Samuel 3

Discussion

- What insights are there in verses 1 to 10 about the way God communicates?
- The message is about judgement (11-14). How do you react if God says something you don't want to hear? How could you react better?
- The message is passed on in verses 15-18. What's the right way to pass on a message like this, and what are the dangers?

It's interesting that Samuel didn't immediately recognise the voice of God. When God communicates in ways other than a big booming voice, it can be tricky to discern what is being said, or if anything is being said at all! Sometimes we have to think outside our expectations.

‘God Speaking’ (ask a group member to read this out)

The man whispered, ‘God, speak to me.’
And a nightingale sang. But the man didn’t hear.
So the man yelled ‘God, speak to me.’
And the thunder and lightning rolled across the sky. But the man did not listen.
The man looked around and said, ‘God, let me see you.’
And a star shined brightly. But the man did not see.
And, the man shouted, ‘God, show me a miracle.’
And a life was born. But the man did not notice.
So, the man cried out in despair, ‘Touch me, God, and let me know you are here.’
Whereupon, God reached down and touched the man.
But the man brushed the butterfly away and walked on.

One of the best ways to sense the voice of God is to make time to pray. This needs to be a two-way communication and not just a one-sided list of requests, concerns and praise. There are two prayers below which may help to focus on the listening aspect of our prayer life and address some of the issues surrounding difficulty in hearing God’s voice.

Activity – Seashells

It is said that if you put a seashell to your ear then you can hear the sea no matter where you are. Give everyone in the group a small seashell.

This shell is a reminder that no matter where you are in the world you can hear the voice of God. He loves you and he wants to communicate with you. He wants to tell you how precious you are and how proud he is of you. He wants to affirm you in your God given gifts and encourage you to move forward with Him. He wants to share His life with you. But in order for us to hear this often still, small voice amongst the noise and hubbub of life and distractions, we need to become silent. We need to become still. It doesn’t matter how big your shell is you’ll never hear the sea if you are trying to listen in a crowded café or a bustling shop. In the same way we need to set ourselves apart and take some time and space in order to let us hear the words that God has for us.

To finish

Perhaps now is a good time to spend some time as a group in silence with the shells as a focus if helpful. Try to give a good few minutes for this activity, which can feel like an eternity when spent in silence, but it is well worth it.

Maybe share with each other anything you believe God is saying during this time.