

# HEARING GODS WORD IN COMMUNITY

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*Earth's crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God,  
But only he who sees takes off his shoes;  
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.*

*Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-61), 'Aurora Leigh'*

## INTRO

We continue to be inspired by Pete Gregs' book on 'how to hear God'. This week we are looking at hearing God's word in community, creation and culture.

**READ** Psalm 19 (either take a verse in turn around the room or read it all aloud together)

**SHARE** if there is a place where you go to feel close to God. This might be described as a *thin* place where heaven and earth feel that little bit closer. Where the skies proclaim the work of his hands.

## READ Acts 17:22-28

Notice in verse 28 Paul quotes from a famous poet of the ancient world. This is a line from 'Phaenomena' by the ancient Greek poet Aratus (315-240BC). It was well known in the ancient world and, since its author had once lived in Athens, we may assume that it held a particular place in the heart of that great city. Paul is not exploiting the culture here, rather he is celebrating it. It is a poem about the top Greek deity Zeus but instead of being repulsed by it, and Paul was distressed to see the city full of Idols (Acts 17:16), Paul uses it to speak about the God who made everything and the fact that he is not far from us. Paul can trace the whisper of God within a pagan text amid a culture littered with idolatrous shrines - sound familiar?

Can you think of a time when God spoke to you through a person who's not a Christian, through a surprising medium like music or film, or in some unsuspecting way?

## TURN, DISCERN, RETURN

Pete Greg recommends these steps when learning to hear God's voice in culture without confusing the many words of the world with the word of God.

**TURN** - learn to turn towards culture. We can miss God at work because we have been taught that the world outside of our religion is dangerous. Paul had memorised a part of Aratus' poem, he knew the architecture and artefacts of the city and was well-schooled in the Classics as well as scripture. John Henry Newman a nineteenth-century cardinal wrote, 'I taught to hear the voice of God and climbed the topmost steeple, but God declared: Go down again - I dwell among the people'. We must spend time becoming students of the world in which God has placed us.

**DISCERN** - It is a very mixed bag indeed! The Bible warns about the deceptive enemy disguised as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14). We must scan the horizon for things in culture that sound like, look like or point towards Jesus. Pay attention to the whisper of your conscience and be sensitive to the consciences of other people. Ask 'is this God's gift to me, and can I receive it for his glory?'

**RETURN** - we must continually return to the bedrock of God's Word in Scripture. This is how we remain sharp in discernment. The great theological Karl Barth famously reminded us, that we need to carry the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Yes, we interpret the culture in the light of the Bible, but we all allow God's voice in the culture to inform us, perhaps opening our eyes to an ancient truth which we have previously missed in God's Word. Just like Martin Luther, William Wilberforce and Martin Luther King did!

## **CULTURE VULTURE GROUP EXERCISE**

This exercise is designed to develop discernment skills in Christians as we seek to relate our faith to the wider world. Any kind of cultural engagement can be used like watching a film together, listening to mainstream music, discussing a work of fiction or as I might suggest in this context trying looking at today's news. This might be done if you have newspapers to hand or use a news website like [www.bbc.co.uk/news](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news). We are going to apply these three filters to a particular expression of culture:

1. *First, we remove our shoes* to recognise that we are walking on holy ground. God is one step ahead of us, speaking and acting even in environments that deny his existence because he is the Creator and Sustainer of all things: 'The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.' (Ps.24.1) We have no right to rebuke what is bad in the culture until we have recognised where God is already at work

in and through it. So the first thing we do is to search for God's presence and celebrate it.

2. *Second, we learn the language*, recognising that for the most part, a different culture is neither particularly good nor bad but just different. Its clothes and customs, its music and language are for the most part not wrong but just morally neutral, and our job is not to replace these things, but rather to respect them. This is a fundamental principle of cross-cultural mission which we must increasingly apply at home. So the second thing we do, having recognised God's presence in the culture, is to respect all that is good - or just different - within it.
3. *Third, we pick a fight*, recognising that there are things within every culture that are sinful, fallen and broken. We don't just accept the culture wholesale, but approach it with discernment, recognising God within it, respecting its different cultural norms, and also rejecting its sinfulness. We have no right to pick a fight with culture until we have learned its language and found God within its gates.

Once you have watched, read or listened to what you have chosen, ask one another these questions:

Where can I see or hear God in this cultural context?

Where can I see brokenness and darkness at work here?

(if you scanned today's news) What might God be saying to me personally through today's world events?

It is thrilling to encounter the resurrected Christ who comes to us in the real world, disguised within the culture, just as he did that day on the Emmaus Road.