

## PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

## The Gift of Listening — A Rare Treasure

The words of divine wisdom uttered by the Psalmist centuries ago said it all so well: "Be still and know that I am God." (Psalm



46:10) It is good to know that many are beginning to appreciate today the value of these words. Spiritual writers are speaking of a 'desert experience' as the locale where stillness prevails and contact with God's Word is made possible.

A desert can provoke many images quite different from each other. It can be viewed as a vast wasteland of dry emptiness — endless stretches of sand with nothing alive and flourishing. Or it can be viewed as a place apart from the confusion of life, and the noises of cities.

We had a desert experience of the first image in the 60's. And there was spiritual barrenness as activism abounded in the Christian community. Thank God, that experience has become past history and we are hearing more and more of a desert experience that follows the second image. People seem to be crying out for a desert journey that takes them apart from the restlessness of a busy world and provides precious moments for a journey inward to find the Spirit Who dwells within us.

I find it refreshing that prayer is "in" today. Anyone who writes about it gains immediate public attention. People are searching for houses of prayer, solitude and aloneness. And thanks be to God for this developing hunger for communication with Him, and for the growing awareness that without Him we can do nothing.

I find it interesting, too, that the development of interest in prayer seems to have been born at the same time as the development of interest in the Scriptures. Listening to the Scriptures is listening to the voice of God as He reveals Himself to us. Our listening to Him and our response become our prayer.

We have in recent years begun to rediscover the Bible as a prayer book. We do not have to be Scripture scholars to profit from it as a source book and inspiration for prayer. What is needed most is attentive listening and a generous heart willing to respond to His words of love and challenge. Jesus spoke of the generous heart as 'rich soil' when He told the parable of the sower: "Some seed (the Word of God) fell into rich soil and grew and produced its crop a hundredfold." (Luke 8:8) In His explanation of the story Jesus added: "As for the part in the rich soil, this is people with a noble and generous heart who have heard the word and take it to themselves and yield a harvest through their perseverance." (Luke 8:15)

I might remark here that we are really listening only when we take the message to ourselves. Which simply means, we begin to listen when we begin to ask ourselves, "What is God saying to me?" "How shall I respond to His Word?" We deceive ourselves when we say: "The message was intended for another audience. I like what I hear. It should have been said but it does not refer to me."

As one ordained to preach the Word of God, I experience the greatest frustration when I realize that my message has fallen on deaf ears. And I am sure that it has when the comment on the sermon runs like this: "I'm glad you said what you did. I noticed a lot of people in the congregation who needed that message." There would have been real listening and rich soil if the remark continued with the words, "including myself."

Let me illustrate how God's Word becomes a living word by using two stories from the Bible. First, let us take the delightful Old Testament story of Jonah. The author was not writing history. His intention was to satirize a fictional prophet who was filled with a sense of self-importance. God's call to Jonah to set off for Nineveh to preach there, was a joke on the so-called prophet. This piece of fiction was the author's way of imparting to the Israelites this all-important message: **God loves all men and not just the Israelites.** The message is as valid today as it was then: God loves all of us, regardless of

the color of our skin, our nationality or whatever categories we assign to others. Prayer rooted in this message is prayer rising out of the all-important personal realization of God's love for me and for my brothers and sisters everywhere.

The New Testament has many stories which reveal the meaning of Jesus' life as it was experienced by the early Christian communities. Essential to the message of Jesus is the story of His Father. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus tells us about our merciful Father Who is ever eager to embrace us with His forgiveness. How we all need to let that message live in our hearts! When God speaks to me, He invites me to respond in words, in new attitudes or in action. How shall I respond to the story of the Prodigal Son? What is my own measure of forgiveness of others? How often do I acknowledge my own failings and seek forgiveness from the Lord? Asking ourselves these two questions would be an indication that we had indeed been good listeners.

The Word of God challenges us to move to new horizons, to make changes in our lives. The process of praying with the Scriptures calls for a commitment to the Word of God as a primary source of our faith. The process is simple but it is at times hard and demanding. St. Bernard once remarked about this kind of prayer: "Don't be afraid. Here elephants can swim and lambs can paddle."

And if we want a special prayer book to help us express our feelings to God, the Scriptures provide us that, too, in the Book of Psalms. Here the whole range of human feelings is expressed — anguish and peace, helplessness and hope, sorrow and joy, hatred and love — the deep feelings that are part of everyone's journey to God.

May the Holy Spirit bring all of us to a deeper appreciation of the value of the Word of God and of the attentive listening we need if we are to make it the special blessing that He has promised to those who hear His word and keep it, (Luke 11:28) even to the point of full discovery that God has first loved us (1 John 4:19). For having found this truth, nothing else really matters.

## Science Increases Awareness of God

In the course of the General Audience on Oct. 22, Paul VI delivered the following address on irreligion in the modern world and its causes.

Brothers, my Brothers!

We undertook a great effort when we started this Holy Year as a work of renewal. What kind of renewal, fundamentally? It is a question of a renewal that will make us find God again in our modern life. It is a question of finding religion again.



Is that possible? We begin by realizing that this finding again is the first problem of our times, the first problem of the contemporary mentality, and for many of us, our first problem, the one that concerns most deeply our soul, our way of thinking, our way of acting.

We who are gathered here to restore to our souls the sense of God, to convert ourselves to religion, that is, to the authentic and vital relationship with God, to impress the right direction on our life, the one that gives meaning and salvation to our existence, to reopen our lips and heart to conversation with God, that is, to pray, we must not be afraid of placing before our conscience this vital and inevitable problem: does God exist, does He really exist? And how are we to

behave in his penetrating and superior presence?

The pressing, multiple question intimidates us and sometimes discourages us. We feel around us the pressure of a world that lives without God. A sea of people, though so near to us, are, and often profess to be a-religious, irreligious. Indifferent to this problem, which we, on the contrary, rightly consider as fundamental; in fact they boast of being laicist, in the radical sense of the word, apathetic, extraneous, almost released from all concern with religion; and they boast of this, as if religious indifference were a sign of freedom and modernity. They claim to live without God. Today, in fact, there are, unfortunately, a good many people who wish to live against God, falsely convinced of two fatal errors: that religion is useless, and that religion is wrong.

We all know what a diffusion and what a complexity of opinions, theories, and movements are concentrated on these pseudo-principles, and what a spectrum of ideas, literature, propaganda and morals is derived from them. Oh, poor religious and Christian civilization of ours, what a mass of negation oppresses you and crushes you! Poor churches of ours, where are the communities that used to celebrate within their walls, in their rites, in their singing, extolling to God their brotherhood? You poor bell-towers, how long, soaring towards the sky, will you oblige us to look up from the earth in the confidence of heavenly horizons?

We must not be insensitive and resigned

to this fate, which, denying God and his Kingdom among us, spreads a starless night over human destinies. The world is beginning to realize that the attempt to deny God recoils, becoming a real denial of man. In any case let it be clear for us that the more atheism is established and spread, on the theoretical or on the practical plane, the more we, in humility and fortitude of spirit, will have to assert the glory of God, our security, our faith, our good fortune, our happiness as Christians, who can recite, nay more, sing, confidently and intrepidly: I believe in God, the almighty Father.

This, then, Brothers, is our duty, our stupendous mission: to teach modern man, whether he be a worker a businessman or a scientist, that increased possession of the world is increased contact with a natural revelation of God, with a first theophany, of Almighty God. This natural revelation is then followed by the supernatural revelation of God-Love, the God of Christianity.

Religion, instead of being unsuitable for the modern world, is more suitable than before, when the world was without scientific culture. To convince the men of our times of this splendid truth, our Jubilee renewal must be affirmed, recalling the words of St. Paul at the Areopagus of Athens: in God, he said, "in Him we live and move and have our being!" (Acts 17, 28).

Let this suffice for the present among the thousand things that could still be said on this subject! And let it be the program of new and modern life, with our Apostolic Blessing.