

A couple of months ago I spent a stormy night on the side of a mountain in a twenty year old tent with a friend of more than twenty years. It was an attempt to patch up the damage that was done to our friendship by more than a year of not seeing each other's faces. This is no ordinary friend. For many years we had struggled together to hear the voice of God and to see His face. We were given to one another to forge a collective vision of God in the heat of life.

We were there for one another when his two day old baby got meningitis and nearly died; when he had to get a heart bypass operation at the age of thirty eight and when his wife lost her fight against cancer shortly thereafter. When I suffered burn-out, nearly lost all I had and struggled with the pain of failure he heard God's voice for me. Many times we cried together, found God's voice together, rejoiced together. We made mistakes, were disobedient to the Voice, suffered immense loss through it but loved one another all the time. We were tempted to judge, to remain in unforgiveness and to walk away many times but we remained true to love and to friendship and in the end to the purposes of Jesus for our lives. But, silence and absence threatened our friendship and we had to get together. Like our friendship, the week-end was not perfect. As if God wanted to show us a picture of our relationship. It was raining; the wind reached speeds that seriously threatened the integrity of the tent. And it was cold. But the fellowship was warm while we lay listening to the deafening wind and the groaning of the tent. We knew we had to do what we were doing.

Our friendship always had two things that raised it above other friendships: we often laid down our lives for each other and we were committed to honesty. The warm moments of "Do you remember?" in the rain and cold had elements of both these qualities.

This experience reminded me again about my other Friend who had to move far away and with whom I have communicated for the last thirty four years without seeing Him in person. Our lives and environments are so different that we just struggle to communicate. I heard Him speaking at times but mostly in the form of instruction or rebuke. Mostly to do with the work I had to do for Him – or did not do. There were times when I really felt his presence although I could not see Him. I did hear His voice at crucial times and I can honestly say that when His voice broke through my noise induced hearing loss, it was always life changing and did a lot to keep our friendship alive. But, the experience with my earthly friend just again emphasized the importance of a real experience with Him.

A night together on the mountain is what I need more than anything else. I need to look into His eyes while He talks to me. I need to hear His voice. I used to want to hear His voice so that I can be protected or make the right choices. I was listening for instructions to build His kingdom. Now I just want to hear His voice. I have learnt that He speaks about trivial things. That He tells me how much He loves me. That He tells me how much He loves my enemy. That He has an opinion about most things I do and that His wisdom often makes the difference between a hard day at the office, the struggle of failure and the peculiar experience of rest that I have come to love so much.

We did not spend that night in the tent speaking about ministry and what we should have done or should have accomplished. We did speak about deep things but we laughed a lot and spoke about the things of life. We made a fire in the rain, prayed for the rain to stop and were heard. We ate together and tripped into the past. There was little instruction, no rebuke and whenever I wanted to put on my teacher's hat, the grace just left.

It is like that with Jesus. We have to spend time together *in life*. Not to "get advice" or to "get revelation" or be brought onto the right path again. We do spend time with Him – "quiet time", or "bible study", or "church" but then we often listen for the instructions or the rebukes or the revelations. Mostly He just wants to have a cup of tea with us while we discuss our children, or friends, or reminisce about the past. He sometimes talks about the future and then we want to make it a prophecy and write in our blog about our experience or lay hands on whoever is near while He just wanted to share some revelation with a friend.

Friendship and conversation go together like cake and candles. They can exist separately but when they come together they represent something unseen that causes us to smile and feel a peculiar satisfaction. The friendship with Jesus is the same. The cake of salvation becomes a celebration when we light the candles of conversation and friendship. We often find that He is the one with the birthday hat who wants to make small talk at the party while we are trying to "bring depth to the conversation". He is the one with the presents while we are trying to get the latest updates on how to live life. He loves parties and giving presents and He loves to talk. You see, He is motivated by love – for so God loved the world – not by mission. That is why He is first relational and then functional. It is difficult for our Western minds to understand that, but it is true.

Adam and Eve were His friends and He walked with them and talked with them. Enoch was walking with Him and disappeared – they spoke. Abraham saw Him and they talked about many things – he was called a friend of God. He spoke to Moses face to face and Moses was called His friend. Every time

when He really wanted a faith response, God spoke. All these faith heroes were only heroes because they heard God. And for them to hear, He had to speak. He speaks to His friends.

One thing we can not say about God is that He is silent. It would be so unfair for Him to be silent when His goal for us is to live from every word that proceeds from His mouth. He wants us to be able to say with Jesus, I can't do anything unless I see Him doing it or hear from Him what to do. It is only because hearing His voice has become such an occasion that some of us have opted to seek for Him only in the Scriptures. Some believe that He stopped speaking because He had said all He wanted to say and that was written down. Not that there is anything wrong with seeking God in the Bible – that is His word and it testifies of Jesus. But, Jesus did say to the Pharisees, "You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life". (Joh 5:39-40)

Jesus called us friends. He said, "No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you. (Joh 15:15) Friendship and conversation go together.

Maybe we should give up some time out of our busy schedule and find Him in a tent on the northern face of a rainy mountain so that we can learn how precious His voice is. So that we can look into His eyes and find nothing but love. So that our friendship can be restored. It may be the best investment you have made in a while.

Or better even, maybe we have to start looking for his face in those around us or in the spreadsheet on the computer or in the boardroom or behind the stove. Maybe we should listen for His voice while others speak or when we are alone for a second between appointments. Maybe we should hear what He wants to say when we watch the news on CNN or hear Him pray for those who irritate us so much on the road.

Maybe it is time for us to claim our birthright – the right to hear the voice of our Friend.