

Article reprinted from *Cross+Way* Issue Spring 2001 No. 80

(C)opyright Church Society; material may be used for non-profit purposes provided that the source is acknowledged and the text is not altered.

HEARING GOD'S VOICE

David Phillips

This is a nation that does not obey the voice of the LORD their God nor receive correction. Truth has perished and has been cut off from their mouth. Jer 7.28

Over the last year and more our nation has witnessed a series of major national problems and disasters. In particular there have been the high profile rail crashes with significant loss of life, the last of which was declared to be a freak accident and extreme bad luck. There has been drought followed by prolonged flooding bringing misery to many thousands. In addition to this the already hard-pressed farmers have had to face the problems brought by BSE and now the devastation of foot-and-mouth disease. How should we react to these things?

It is important to remember that whatever we have faced it is nothing compared to the problems besetting some other parts of the world where famine, disease and loss of life through flooding are almost commonplace. More importantly, we must be careful in seeking to claim the mind of God.

Supremely God has revealed His will and purposes in scripture. When we look at scripture we see very plainly that it is not possible to make a direct link between individual suffering and sin. To be sure, there are instances where people suffer as a direct consequence of the judgement of God on their sin, for example, Herod Agrippa and Elymas the sorcerer. However, in some cases the purpose of suffering is to bring glory to God. Jesus says this explicitly in John 9 about the man born blind and it can also be seen as the reason why Job suffered. Sometimes suffering can be to test or keep us dependent upon God, which is how the Lord explained the persistence of Paul's 'thorn in the flesh'. In the case of Josiah, to die was a blessing from God. His death saved him from the disasters that were about to come on Judah (2 Chron 34.28). At other times it can seem to us as if there is no rhyme or reason for what happens.(Ecc. 8.14)

There can, therefore, be no neat assumption that individual suffering is the judgement of God. However, in every instance above there is at least a questioning of why suffering has come. We must be prepared to ask whether God is trying to teach us something through what is happening. It may increase our humility and dependence upon Him, it should make us examine ourselves. God may be using this to bring glory to Himself. Sometimes, we may, like Solomon, remain bewildered by the workings of God, but it should be our desire to understand.

People differ as to whether we can be more definite about God's judgement on nations. For individuals judgement lies supremely in the future but it can be argued that for nations judgement is always in the here and now. Whether or not this is so the problems we currently face must bring us up short, make us stop and think. As with individual

suffering we must be prepared to ask the right questions, to ask in particular what is God seeking to show us and teach us through this? Yet these are precisely the question the leaders in our nation seem unwilling and even incapable of asking. It has been claimed that 'man has learned to cope with all questions of importance without recourse to God as a working hypothesis.' This is what many clearly believe and, as a consequence they are not able to ask what God is doing. Sadly, it also seems national leaders within the churches are either unable to voice awkward questions or have so little spiritual authority that no-one listens when they speak.

On the face of it we as a nation have much to be thankful for. There is considerable material prosperity, and when asked many people consider themselves to be happy. But knowing, as we do, the will and mind of God revealed in scripture there is much to be concerned about and ashamed of in our nation today. We must as a nation give thought to God and His purposes. We must as Christians call people to repentance, to recognise that we have strayed from God's ways and that whether in the short term or long term the consequences of such rebellion are severe.

It is with these things in mind that Church Society has initiated a Vision for the Nation; a Christian Manifesto. In the first instance this will be directed to ministers and elders (primarily because it is easier to identify them). We are seeking to ensure widespread support from bible believing people. The core concern is to make people recognise that there are moral and spiritual issues facing us as a nation. The response to a government budget or to political canvassing is too often motivated by personal interest, 'what is in it for me'. We believe that many people know that there are more important matters and as Christians we want to make people think about these things.

It is time that people began to ask where we are heading as a nation. It is time to ask what God is saying to us through the problems we have been facing. It is certainly time that we as a people repented of our godlessness and turned to the ways of God. Our longing is that the people of our nation and our national leaders would recognise the importance and truth of what is set out in the Manifesto. We pray that they would see in the Vision a positive statement of the good and well-being that comes through joyful obedience to the loving purposes of God.