The Voice of the Holy Spirit

Canon Prof Carol Harrison

In this chapter, I would like to suggest that what a voice sounds like can communicate as much – or more – than what it actually says. Let me give two examples.

The first is when we say someone's name.

In St John's Gospel, Mary Magdalene turns from peering into the tomb where Jesus had been laid, to find a figure standing next to her. He asks why she is weeping and who she is looking for: 'Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away". Jesus said to her, "Mary!". She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni" (which means Teacher).'[1] It is a moment of recognition: "Mary!". Hearing her name, Mary learns everything and nothing. Of course, she already knows her name, but hearing it enunciated with what must have been Jesus' particular tone of voice, it conveys more than words: she learns that her Lord is alive, is risen, and is present with her.

The second example is when we say: 'I love you'.

In his work *A Lover's Discourse*, Roland Barthes sets out what he calls a 'dramatic' method: one which first and foremost involves listening to the voice of the lover, who communicates not through *what* they say, but by simple utterance. For Barthes, 'I love you' is one such utterance. It is not so much linguistic or semiotic, but musical, and by

1. John 20:15-16 (NRSV).

sounding, it evokes the reality it refers to. As he observes, '"I love you" has no meaning whatever; it is simply a figure which is 'flung out in a single impulse… To say "I love you", is not to express a meaning but a relation.'[2]

I love you is therefore like the Psalmist's *jubilus*, or cry of joy, and the 'amen' he observes:[3] they are cries which do not describe or define anything, but simply well up and explode from within – or, as Augustine puts it, they are like a child gestating in the womb of a pregnant woman which must inexorably be brought forth.[4]

In what follows, I would like to reflect on the ways in which the Holy Spirit is encountered and known in much the same way as Jesus' voice addressing Mary in the garden, or the voice of the lover saying 'I love you' – in other words, as a voice or sound which evokes recognition, relation and response. In particular, I would like to focus on the way in which the speaking and hearing *of* the Spirit, or better – *in* the Spirit – unifies those who speak and those who hear.

Of course, when we refer to God's 'voice' – of the voice of the Holy Spirit – we are using a very human metaphor. The eternal, incorporeal and immutable God does not breathe in, expand His lungs, force air through His windpipe, articulate it with his tongue and emit a series of sounds, as we temporal, bodily, mutable creatures do. God's voice is not the time-bound, physical, evanescent thing that we call a voice.[5]

2. Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* trans. Richard Howard (Vintage: London, 2002), 147-48.
3. Ibid., 150, 153.
4. Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms*, 137.4: 'Our heart is pregnant, on the point of giving birth, and searching for a place to bring forth its adoration'. Cf. 32.ii.8; 65.2: 'the sound of a heart labouring to bring forth into its voice its happiness over what it has conceived'. Augustine, *The Works of Saint Augustine*, vol. III/20, Past Masters, ed. John E. Rotelle et al., (Charlottesville, Va: InteLex Corporation, 2014), 244–45 and Augustine, *The Works of Saint Augustine*, vol. III/15, Past Masters, ed. John E. Rotelle et al., (Charlottesville, Va: InteLex Corporation, 2014), 400–401; author's translation; following references are translated by the author unless otherwise stated.
5. Augustine, *Literal Commentary on Genesis*, 1.4.9: '… it is by the Word, always adhering to the Father, that God eternally says everything, not with the sound of a voice nor with thoughts running through time which sounds take, but with the light, co-eternal with himself, of the Wisdom he has begotten'. Cf 1.10.20; 2.6.12; 8.16-9.19. Augustine, *The*

Rather, when God speaks at the beginning of Genesis, bringing creation into existence from nothing, early Christian theologians were agreed that he does so in His co-eternal Word, in a spontaneous, simultaneous (and therefore timeless) act of will and power.[6]

So, is the divine 'voice' no more than a metaphor, a way of describing the way in which God creates everything in a single act of will and power? The very fact that voice is the metaphor which is used in this context should make us pause. A metaphor only works, after all, if it bears some likeness to what it conveys. At its best, it provides a way to pass from one reality to another; to bridge the gap between words and realities; to negotiate what cannot be described and defined, but which *can*, through the metaphor, be evoked and related to. Rather than asking whether God's voice is no more than a metaphor, we should instead be asking: what does the metaphor of voice tell us about the nature of the divine reality it is used to evoke?

First, we must remember that the voice belongs to God the Trinity. We have already noted that when God 'speaks' 'in the beginning', he was understood to be speaking in Christ, the eternally begotten Word through whom everything is made.[7] Indeed, Ambrose suggests that there is a sort of inner Trinitarian speaking and listening, when he observes that God the Father does not only speak *in* Christ, but *to*

Works of Saint Augustine, vol. I/13, Past Masters, ed. John E. Rotelle et al., (Charlottesville, Va: InteLex Corporation, 2014), 42, 45, 54, 98.

6. Ambrose, *Hexaemeron*, 2.33: 'The Word of God is His will; the work of God is nature. He created light and illumined the darkness. "And God said, be light made, and light was made." He did not speak in order that action should follow; rather, the action was completed with the Word.'; 4.8: 'The voice coincides with the completion of the effect of its operation'; 4.9: 'He had the power of moving the waters who was able to say, "Lazarus, come forth" and bring the dead back to life, since God always brings to pass what He ordains.' Saint Ambrose, *Hexameron, Paradise, and Cain and Abel*, trans. John J. Savage in *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, Vol. 42, (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1961).
7. E. g. Ambrose, *Hexaemeron*, 1.15: '… the Lord, when asked who He was, replied: "I am the beginning, I who speak with you" [John 8.25]… in this beginning, that is, in Christ, God created heaven and earth, because "All things were made through him and without him was made nothing that was made [John 1.3]."'

Christ, who is his eternal power and wisdom.[8] Thus, when Genesis says 'God spoke' and 'God created' and 'God saw that it was good', Ambrose comments: 'He spoke as if speaking to one who knew all the wishes of His Father. He saw as if He knew all that his Son had accomplished, acting with Him in community of operation… The Son always knows the will of the Father and the Father that of the Son. And the Son listens to the Father and the Father hears the Son, through the unity of nature, will and substance.'[9]

But what of the Holy Spirit? Describing the eternal begetting of the Word, or what he calls the 'utterance' of God, in the context of commenting on Genesis 1, Augustine identifies the Holy Spirit as the generosity (*beneficentia*), or love (*amor*), which characterises the inseparable relation, and mutual operation, of Father and Son in bringing creation into being. He writes:

> Now when the Son speaks the Father speaks, because when the Father speaks, a Word is uttered which is the Son, with God uttering in an eternal manner, if "manner" it can be called, a co-eternal Word. For in God there is a supreme and holy and just generosity (*beneficentia*) and a kind of love (*amor*) in his activity which comes not from any need on his part but from generosity (*beneficentia*). That is why, before scripture came to the text, "God said, Let light be made"[10] it preceded it by saying "And the Spirit of God was being borne over the water".[11]

and comments:

> when the Spirit of God was to be mentioned, in which his holy benevolence and love is understood, it is said to be borne *over* what he loves, in case it should be thought that it was out of the compulsion of his needs that God loved the things which were to be made, rather than out of the abundance of his generosity (*beneficentia*).[12]

8. Ambrose, *Hexaemeron*, 3.10; 6.2.
9. Ibid., 3.18-19.
10. Genesis 1:3.
11. Genesis 1:2; Augustine, *Literal Commentary on Genesis*, 1.5.11.
12. Augustine, *Literal Commentary on Genesis*, 1.7.13. Ambrose, *Hexaemeron*, 2.29 similarly identifies 'the spirit of God' which 'moved

In other words, the voice of God which brings creation into being is a Trinitarian one, in which God speaks to and in His Word, through the overflowing benevolence and love of the Holy Spirit, to bring creation into being. God speaks, in other words, rather like Barthes' lover, in a spontaneous utterance which brings a new reality and relation into being in saying, 'I love you'.

So, the metaphor of God's speaking at creation does indeed tell us a good deal about the divine Trinitarian nature, as well as the nature of the voice. But there are also many instances when God speaks, not in His own nature or substance, but through created, inspired intermediaries. As we are all aware, it is the Holy Spirit who is traditionally held to speak through the prophets; to inspire the words of the evangelists; to preach through the apostles; to sing and pray in the body of Christ, the Church; and to blow through the disciples at Pentecost. In these contexts, it is perfectly legitimate to refer to God's voice in a non-metaphorical way, without risking any anthropomorphism. But whilst it is perfectly legitimate, it is still not unproblematic.

The questions raised by the notion of inspiration are, in fact, the ones that have long plagued theological reflection on grace: what is due to God's gracious inspiration and what is due to human free will? Is the Holy Spirit's inspiration a gift or a reward? Is inspiration irresistible? And so on. It should come as no surprise that it is precisely in these contexts that pneumatology, or reflection on the Holy Spirit, often comes to the fore, at least in Western theology. I do not propose to tackle these questions directly here. Rather, by reflecting a bit further on the voice of the Holy Spirit, and most especially on the unifying power of that voice, I hope we might be able to address them at least implicitly and in practice (which I suspect is probably the best we can do anyway).

It is interesting, in this context, to note that early Christian commentators on Genesis are insistent that the voice of God's command, which brought creation into existence, remains in it as what they call a 'law of nature': it is like a seed, containing in itself its

over the face of the waters' with the Holy Spirit and cites Psalm 32:6: 'By the word of the Lord the heavens were established and all the power of them by the spirit of his mouth', together with Job 33:4: 'The divine Spirit, which made me'.

future growth.[13] This insight enabled them to take account, not only of God's initial creation, but also of His continuing providential action in ordering and sustaining His creation. But alongside this innate, as it were, natural, providential manifestation of the divine voice (so that mute creation is sometimes described as a chorus, harmoniously singing praises to the Creator),[14] early Christian theologians were forced to acknowledge that human sinfulness requires a different sort of providence – one they sometimes call a 'voluntary providence' –[15] whereby God's will and power reorders and redirects the fallen will. Obviously, this 'voluntary providence' comprehends the economy of salvation history – and most especially, as we have just noted, the Holy Spirit's inspiration of the voices of prophets, evangelists, apostles, preachers and teachers, as well as His inspiration of the voices of the faithful themselves, groaning in prayers of confession, longing, desire, hope and love.[16]

But what sort of voice is this and what does it sound like? One way to begin to answer this question is to return to where we started this paper, to St John's Gospel. Here, anticipating His passion, Jesus promises that the Father will send the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, to teach and remind the disciples of everything He has taught them, to testify to Him and glorify Him.[17] And so, almost immediately after Mary's encounter with Jesus in the garden, John describes the risen Lord's appearance to the disciples: 'he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit".'[18] Cyril of Alexandria comments on

13. Basil of Caesarea, *Hexaemeron*, 5.1: 'For the voice which was then heard and that first command became, as it were, a law of nature and remained in the earth, giving it the power to produce and bear fruit for all succeeding time'. Basil of Caesarea, *Hexaemeron*, in *St. Basil: Exegetic Homilies*, trans. Blomfield Jackson, in *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, Vol. 46, (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1963).
14. Ibid., 3.9.
15. Augustine, Literal Commentary on Genesis, 8.9.17-18.
16. Augustine, *Propositions from the Epistle to the Romans*, 46; *Expositions of the Psalms*, 29.ii.16; 54.8 in Augustine, *The Works of Saint Augustine*, vol. I/13, Past Masters, ed. John E. Rotelle et al., (Charlottesville, Va: InteLex Corporation, 2014).
17. E. g. John 14.25-26; 15.26; 16.7.
18. John 20:22 (NRSV).

this passage that it is only through Christ's gift of the Spirit that the apostles were empowered to proclaim the Gospel, for without it, 'they would never have understood the mystery of Christ or been able to teach it perfectly unless the Spirit had enlightened them and revealed what exceeds human reason and prayer [and he quotes 1 Corinthians 12:3:] "No one can say that Jesus is Lord except in the Holy Spirit".'[19] The account of the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, recounted in Acts, similarly demonstrates that it is by the gift of the Holy Spirit – or in and through the Holy Spirit – that the disciples are able to address the crowds gathered from different nations in voices they can understand, despite their different languages. (Unlike Babel, at Pentecost, speaker and hearer are united, rather than divided, by what they hear.)

As well as attributing the inspired preaching of the apostles to the Holy Spirit, early Christian theologians were unanimous in their belief that those works which eventually found a place in the canon of Scripture were also inspired by the Holy Spirit. As Gregory of Nyssa observes: 'Therefore the God-filled saints are inspired with the power of the Spirit, and the reason every scripture is said to be inspired by God, is that it is the teaching of the divine infusion of breath. If the bodily veil of the words is taken away, what remains is Sovereign and Life and Spirit, in accordance with great Paul and the Gospel saying. For Paul said that, for him who turns from the letter to the Spirit, what is apprehended is no longer the slavery that kills, but a Lord who is the lifegiving Spirit; and the sublime Gospel says, 'The words which I speak are Spirit and Life'[20] being stripped of their bodily veil.'[21]

Like the voices of the disciples at Pentecost, this meant that the authors of Scripture were believed to be unified and concordant in their witness to the truth, despite any apparent contradictions (and despite the fact that they might end up being heard to say more than they realised!). What we have described as a recognisable tone of voice becomes important here, for it is not so much *what* a particular writer has to say as the motivation and message they wish to convey *through*

19. Cyril of Alexandria. *Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John*, trans. P.E. Pusey. (Oxford: James Parker & Co., 1874), 12.1.
20. John 6:63.
21. Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium III: An English Translation with Commentary and Supporting Studies*, eds. Johannes Zachhuber and Giulio Maspero, (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 3.5.15-16.

what they say: as Gregory puts it, it is the spirit, rather than the letter, that matters – and often, at least for early Christian writers, this meant interpreting a text figuratively or spiritually rather than literally.

But we need to remind ourselves that the confidence of early Christian exegetes in expounding a text in this way was not only founded upon their belief in the Holy Spirit's inspiration of Scripture; it was a confidence which was itself inspired *by* the Holy Spirit, enabling the teacher or preacher to discover and expound the truths or mysteries of the faith and enabling their reader or listener to take them to heart and act upon them. Early Christian exegesis therefore presents us with a polyphony of voices, harmonised and unified by the one Spirit who inspires the text, the preacher *and* the congregation. Interpretations that were hostile and harmful to the faith were avoided by what might be called a 'hermeneutical circle'; in other words, by the conviction that every interpretation must be inspired, taught, received and acted upon in and by the Spirit. Augustine characteristically identifies this action of the Spirit with love when he comments in his *On Christian Doctrine* (which was probably intended as a guide for exegetes and preachers):

> So anyone who thinks that he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them but cannot by his understanding build up this double love of God and neighbour, has not yet succeeded in understanding them. Anyone who derives from them an idea which is useful for supporting this love but fails to say what the writer demonstrably meant in the passage has not made a fatal error, and is certainly not a liar.[22]

Indeed, when he later considers when it is appropriate to interpret a passage spiritually rather than literally, he insists that if it does not, in its plain sense, communicate the double commandment, then it should be interpreted figuratively so that it does.[23] For Augustine, as for so

22. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans, J.F. Shaw, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, Vol. 2, ed. Philip Schaff. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), 1.36.40.
23. Ibid., 3.10.14.

many early Christian exegetes, then, the distinctive tone of the voice of the Holy Spirit is the voice of love.

What we referred to as a 'hermeneutical circle', is, of course, not only the key to exegesis, but to the teaching or communication of Scripture. Observing that the Holy Spirit could, indeed, have simply inspired a person directly, inwardly, and without the need for a teacher or preacher, in the preface to his *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine stresses the fact that the very act of speaking and listening, of relating to another person and sharing the truths of the faith with them, actually effects what is being taught. If the one message of the Scriptures is love of God and neighbour, then the act of communicating it and sharing it with another is a way of uniting speaker and hearer in the very love they teach and learn. He therefore urges that 'there would be no way for love, which ties people together in the bonds of unity, to make souls overflow and as it were intermingle with each other, if human beings learned nothing from other humans'.[24] Similarly, in another work on *Instructing Beginners in Faith*, he gives the example of sharing something we know well with someone who is unfamiliar with it, so that we encounter it afresh, through them, and are thereby united with them: 'For so great is the power of sympathy', he comments, 'that when people are affected by us as we speak and we by them as they learn, we dwell in one another and thus both they, as it were, speak in us what they hear, while we, after a fashion, learn in them what we teach.'[25] The bond which unites teacher and pupil, speaker and hearer, so closely that they intermingle with each other, dwell in one other, and become one in speaking and listening, is again the voice of love, the Holy Spirit. And once again, it is not so much the precise wording of the text, or carefully chosen expressions, as the particular tone of voice – the voice of love – which conveys the truth and unites people in it.

But this may all sound rather vague and woolly: how can the truth be communicated, and souls united, by a tone of voice? In fact, it was a commonplace among classical rhetorical theorists, who taught the art of public speaking, and who shaped the mindset and practice of early Christian theologians, that one of the key factors of effective speech was what they called *pronuntiatio* – or pronunciation – in

24. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine,* prologue, 6, 8. Cf. 3.16.333.
25. Augustine, *Instructing Beginners in Faith*, 12.