

YOUR VOICE IS ONLY A MICROPHONE!

Today's Text: Jn 1: 19-36

Extracts:

Now this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said" [Jn 1: 19-23]

*"Sesame Street" is a very popular American children's TV educational show which is viewed all over the world. Now, a Nigerian version has just been launched and it is called "Sesame Square."¹ The show stars Kami, a girl muppet who is HIV-positive and Zobi, an energetic troublesome boy muppet whose escapades help children to learn from their mistakes. Asked by a reporter why he was joining **Sesame Square**, Zobi said (among others), "I'm excited about telling all of you about my favorite things- and especially about my obsession with yams!"*

*We know that muppets, of themselves, cannot speak but actors (hidden from view) speak through them. A popular muppet on **Sesame Street** is Cookie Monster, suggesting that he loves cookies. On **Sesame Square**, however, Zobi's favourite food is not cookies but yams, Nigeria's staple food. So, what do those cultural variations tell us? They suggest that programmers and sponsors are merely using the voices of the muppets to convey their messages to their target audiences. Therefore, the muppet's voice is only a microphone- it magnifies what is spoken into it. Our voices are also like that. When we speak, somebody or something is speaking through us. So, who is using your voice? In this week's Bible text, some Jewish religious leaders came to John the Baptist to ask him who he was. He replied that he was the voice of one crying in the wilderness. Let us find out who was using his voice as a microphone.*

¹ Based on "Nigeria: Sesame Square Premieres," 27 July 2010; <http://allafrica.com/stories/201007270168.html> ; and "HIV-positive muppet to star in Nigeria's 'Sesame Street,' CNN, October 06, 2010; http://articles.cnn.com/2010-10-06/entertainment/sesame.street.nigeria_1_hiv-positive-muppet-nigerian-aids-relief?_s=PM:SHOWBIZ

1. Background: John the Baptist as a mere voice!

You are sitting in your living room watching television. The phone rings and you pick it up. Then, you say to the caller, “I can’t *hear* you. Please, *speak* louder!” Who was the mouth speaking for in that simple experiment? When the phone rang, it was your ears that heard it. It was your hands that picked the phone and it was with your ears that you listened. Yet, it was your mouth that spoke and what it said was on behalf of your whole self that consists of your body, mind and spirit! Therefore, when we use such simple expressions as “I am sad,” or “I’m on the way,” the voice is merely playing the role of a microphone for “out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks” [Matt. 12: 34].

In this week’s Bible text, we see John the Baptist launching a ministry, the kind of which had not been seen before in Israel. If you comb the whole of the Old Testament, the closest to water baptism was when the children of Israel passed through the Red Sea on their way from Egypt to the Promised Land. Paul alluded to it when he wrote to the Corinthian church, “I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, *all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea*” [1 Cor. 10: 1-2]. Since the practice was not in the Law of Moses, the religious leaders of the time did not know by whose authority John baptized [Mk 11: 27-33]. Yet, they followed him! John was using some power beyond his bravado! Let us follow the story from there:

a) *John’s background*

The Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to John by the Jordan River to ask him, “Who are you?” [Jn 1: 19]. I am sure they already knew that he was the son of Zacharias the priest and his wife, Elizabeth, the cousin of Mary, the mother of Jesus [Lk 1: 5, 16, 57-63]. Some of them might have heard of his miraculous conception, when angel Gabriel appeared to his aged father in the temple and told him that he and his old wife were going to bear a son to be called John who would be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother’s womb. He would turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he would go before the Lord “in the spirit and power of Elijah” [vv. 13-17]. John lived in the deserts “till the day of his manifestation” [v. 80], “clothed in camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey” [Matt. 3: 4].

b) *The word John heard*

Jesus began His own ministry at about thirty years of age [Lk 3: 23], and John was about six months older than Jesus [Lk 1:24-26]. Therefore, we can infer that John emerged from his life of recluse in the deserts at about

the same age or a little older than thirty years. We are told, “the *word of God* came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness, and he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins” [Lk 3: 2-3]. What was the word that John heard which his voice began to magnify?

As cousins, John would certainly have heard things about Jesus from his mother, Elizabeth. However, John lived in the deserts and we cannot be too sure that he ever visited home. But as soon as he heard the word of God, he did as he was told. He asked people to repent and be baptized in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. Therefore, *John was the forerunner of Christ to announce His imminent ministry*. Was that new? It had been prophesied through Isaiah [Is. 40: 3-5] and Malachi [Mal. 4: 5-6]. As indicated earlier, angel Gabriel had told John’s parents about his earthly ministry even before he was conceived.

When the priests and Levites sent by the Pharisees [Jn 1: 24] came to John by the Jordan to tell them who exactly he was, since he was in his own words not Elijah or the Prophet, he said that he was “the voice of one crying in the wilderness: make straight the way of the Lord,” quoting the prophecy of Isaiah [Jn 1: 23].

John did not stop there. Questioned by the messengers why he was baptizing since he was neither the Christ nor Elijah nor the Prophet, he informed them that the Christ was already among them but that they did not yet know Him. The following day, John saw Jesus coming toward him and he exclaimed, “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is He of whom I said, ‘after me comes a Man who is preferred before me, for He was before me’” [vv. 25-30]. Where did those words come from that John’s voice was amplifying?

It was not from the earlier prophecies but from a subsequent update. John told his listeners, “*I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God*” [vv. 31-34].

The Gospels of Matthew [Matt. 3: 13-17], Mark [Mk 1: 9-11] and Luke [Lk 3: 21-22] report that the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in the form of a dove *after* He had been baptized by John. But in John’s version, the Baptist saw the Holy Spirit resting upon Jesus *before* he baptized Him. Is there any contradiction? No. The Baptist was in spirit and the voice of God the Father speaking about His Son and the Holy Spirit confirming it *all happened at the same time*. John went ahead and did as instructed by God. But, like thunder and lightning (that occur at the same time in the sky), light travels faster than sound. We first see the flash of lightning and

we just know that thunder will soon follow. In like manner, the observers around John who were not in spirit (the sources for the other three Gospel writers) first saw the light of the Holy Spirit (in the form of a dove) followed by the thunderous voice of God only after the event! Those who walk by faith act in advance of the things hoped for [**Heb. 11: 1**]!

It is clear from the story that John spoke as he had heard from God and did as he was commanded. He was in deed a mere voice that served only as God's microphone. This is supported in Paul's epistle to the Thessalonians about the rapture of the Church, where he wrote, "The Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, *with the voice of an archangel*, and with the trumpet of God" [**1 Thess. 4: 16**]. So who is speaking with your voice right now?

2. So who is speaking through you?

You may have had the privilege to drive on one of your country's best roads. The surface is smooth. The road signs are all working. But if you observe the vehicles that are plying that road, you may find some new and gliding while some are old and smoky! In like manner, that you are born-again does not mean that each time you open your mouth, it is the Spirit of God speaking! Therefore, it is necessary to find out who is speaking through you, who is using your voice as his/her/its microphone *at a particular point in time*. The following are possible users of your voice, among others:

a) *Logic or Expertise*

The world system is built around certain values that are centred mainly on scientific reasoning or political correctness. Emphasis is placed on logic (what makes sense) and empirical knowledge (information obtained from what can be observed through the 5 senses- touch, taste, smell, hear or see) or political expediency (what is popular or can win you general acceptance). Therefore, we may sometimes find that what we say has been influenced by book knowledge (expertise) or experience or political correctness. For example, the atheist says there is no God because you cannot prove empirically that He exists. So, when s(he) speaks negatively about God, you can easily recognize who is using his/her microphone!

Take the experience of Paul when he was being taken as a prisoner to Rome. At Myra in Lycia, the centurion found an Alexandrian ship going to Rome and he put the prisoners on board. Paul advised them, saying, "I *perceive* that this voyage will end with disaster and much loss, not only of the cargo and ship, but also of lives." But "the centurion was more persuaded by the helmsman and the owner of the ship than by the things spoken by Paul" [**Acts 27: 1-11**]. They listened to expertise and experience. Not long after, they ran into a tempest and all hope that anything could be saved was lost. Paul came to the experts and said to

them, “You should have listened to me, and not have ... incurred this disaster and loss.” He then went on to give them a message of hope, that no life would be lost but only the ship! Who spoke that confidence into Paul? He told them, “for *there stood by me this night an angel of God* to whom I belong and whom I serve, *saying*, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul; *you must be brought before Caesar; and indeed God has granted you all those who set sail with you.*’” Thereafter, they followed Paul’s word. In the end, the ship broke into pieces but all the 276 persons on board were saved [**vv. 12-44**]. So, faith may carry you much farther than expertise, logic or political correctness because the just live by it [**Habb. 2: 4**].

There is another form of logic that is common among born-again people. They may dispute the word of God they are hearing because it is against their mode of worship or culturally-influenced Christian practices or not directly found in the Scriptures. If they had been in John the Baptist’s place, they might have refused to baptize people because it was not in the then ‘Bible’ used by the Jews! They could have disputed with Paul over the use of handkerchiefs and aprons from his body for healing the sick or casting out evil spirits because Jesus never did or said so [**Acts 19: 12**]! They would have accused Moses of idol worship when he made the brass serpent [**Num. 21: 9**] because, as a graven image, it contradicted one of the Ten Commandments [**Ex. 20: 4**]! It takes faith to recognize when God is using your voice to speak truth to you or others.

b) *Spirits of deception*

Sometimes, it is the spirits of deception, captained by Satan, which may be trying to speak through us. For example, on one occasion, Jehoshaphat the king of Judah was visiting Ahab king of Israel. Ahab requested him to go to war with him against the king of Syria over the territory of Ramoth in Gilead. Jehoshaphat asked that they should first inquire of the Lord. Ahab brought in about 400 prophets who said, “Go up, for the Lord will deliver it into the hand of the king.” Jehoshaphat who appeared to have the spirit of discernment said to Ahab, “Is there not still a prophet of the Lord here, that we may inquire of him?” They sent for Micaiah who told the king’s messenger trying to influence him to say what others had told the king, “As the Lord lives, *whatever the Lord says to me, that I will speak.*” It was through this prophet that the truth was revealed. God wanted Ahab killed in battle for his sins against Naboth whose land he had misappropriated after murdering an innocent man [**1 Kgs 21: 1-19**]. It turned out that God had “put a lying spirit in the mouth of all the (400) prophets” [**1 Kgs 22: 1-23**]!

Sometimes, such lying spirits may use us at the point of our complacency or spiritual arrogance. For example, when Peter recognized Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, the Lord praised him, saying, “Flesh and blood has

not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.” Soon after, Jesus revealed to the disciples His coming crucifixion, death and resurrection. Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, “Far be it from You; this shall not happen to You!” Jesus turned to him and said, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men” [Matt. 16: 13-23]. Peter’s voice was used in the first instance by God and in the second instance by Satan. *Jesus was in Spirit and He knew the difference.* Do you know how many people of God speak as Satan’s agents every now and then without your knowing the difference? Be careful!

c) *The Spirit of truth*

When Jesus was sending forth His disciples, He told them that should they be delivered up, they should not worry about how or what they should speak because it would be given to them in that hour what to speak, adding, “it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks to you” [Matt. 10: 19-20]. The writer of Hebrews amplified that truth where he said, “God, who at sundry times and in various ways, spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son” [Heb. 1: 1-2]. That Spirit of truth still speaks to us, as in the story of John the Baptist under consideration.

When God’s honour is at stake, He can speak to us through any medium—clean or unclean. For example, Balaam was a soothsayer [Josh. 13: 22] with a reputation for cursing, not blessing people. But when Balak hired him to curse the children of Israel, “the Lord put a word in his mouth” to bless them and speak accurate prophecies about their future [Num. 23: 16-19].

An important lesson from the forgoing analysis is the need for you to *have the spirit of discernment so as to know the difference between truth and error.*

3. Conclusion: Jesus is the voice of God!

Of John the Baptist’s witness, Jesus told the Pharisees, “You have sent to John and he has borne witness to the truth” [Jn 5: 33]. In his witness, John pointed the Jews to Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world [Jn 1: 25-30]. Jesus has said, “I have come as a light into the world, that whoever believes in Me should not abide in darkness... *for I have not spoken on My own authority; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak. And I know that His command is everlasting life. Therefore, whatever I speak, just as the Father has told Me, so I speak*” [Jn 12: 46-50]. *So, Jesus is the voice of God. When you do what He says, you are doing the will of God.* Then your voice becomes God’s microphone.