

On the Witness of St Martin of Tours, 11th November

There are very few places where I have felt a tangible pull on my soul, but the tomb of St Martin of Tours is one of them. It was not exactly a physical sensation, at least not of a normal kind: perhaps I could describe it best as having felt a little bit like the pull of a magnet – although I understand this in a spiritual and moral sense, rather than as something material. But it was extremely vivid.



The sensation reminds me a little bit of the moment when God's voice came to Samuel in the temple (1 Samuel 3.1-14). At first Samuel thought it must be his teacher, Eli, who was calling him; only gradually did the old priest discern that this must be the prompting of the Spirit of God, at which point he instructed Samuel to reply, *'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening'* (1 Samuel 3.9;10). Just as Samuel has to hear the voice of God three times before he is able to understand what is happening to him, so I went into the crypt of the St Martin's Basilica in Tours three times before I felt quite sure that there really was some kind of 'message' impressing itself on me, strange as this may seem. The Bible, of course, is full of moments like this, although our own experience recognises them less.

We should take note of another detail at the start of the Prophet Samuel's life as the servant of God. *'The word of the Lord,'* says the text, *'was rare in those days; visions were not widespread'* (1 Samuel 3.1). Interpreters have puzzled over this detail. Why should God seem to speak – or to prompt his people in other ways – at *some* times but not at *others*? It is a question which vexed the Fathers and Mothers of the Desert, too. Here is a comment from one of them, Abba Felix:

Some brothers, accompanied by some seculars (lay people), came towards the Abbot Felix and asked him if he would utter a teaching for them. And the old man was silent. But when they persisted at length with their request, he said, 'You want to hear a teaching?' and they said, 'Of course, Father.' So the old man said, 'These days there are no teachings. When the brothers used to make enquiry of the elders, and then did as they had been instructed, God granted the means to speak. But now,

because they question everything, and do not put it into practice, God has withdrawn this grace of teaching from the elders; nor can they find anything to say, since no one heeds what they have to say.’ Hearing this, the brothers sighed deeply and said, ‘Pray for us, Father.’

From *The Sayings of the Fathers*

God seems to stop *speaking* when his people are no longer *listening*.

We shall reflect some more on the *reopening of our ears* to the call of God when we come to Advent in a few weeks. But for me, it was at the tomb of *St Martin*, whom we commemorate *this week*, that the prompting came. It will not be lost on you that ‘Martinmas’ is also now *Remembrance Day*. We might even ask what Martin has to say about *that* in particular.

The simplest way to summarise Martin’s life (AD316 or 336-397) is to describe him as a *soldier* who was converted to a life of *prayer* and of *poverty* after his encounter with a beggar at Amiens in northern France. Like the rich young man in the Gospel (Matthew 19.16-22), Martin felt compelled by Jesus’ suggestion that *‘if you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’* Martin himself embodies what it is for a man of the world to be converted from the ways of *human* power to those of the power of *God*, specifically in the face of *violence* and *poverty*.

For me, too, Jesus’ words have become increasingly compelling since my mysterious encounter at St Martin’s tomb. This prompting, a kind of *stirring of the soul*, continues to remind me that it is not enough simply to hear the word of God and then continue with life as normal. Some kind of *change* within us is called forth – perhaps, as it was for St Martin, to set aside our dependence on human power and control, and to take more seriously the needs of the poor and the dispossessed. For some of us, it may include the calling to live more simply, more graciously. For all of us, it is a prompting to allow our whole life to be conformed more completely to the values of the kingdom of God as commended to us in the teaching of Jesus. As we take these spiritual and moral promptings more seriously, as we allow them to guide us to embody the values of God’s kingdom more completely, we shall find also, with Samuel and with St Martin, that the word of God begins to address us more clearly, more frequently, and with greater effect both within us and around us. May it be so. Amen.

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