

3. The Voice

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Preacher: Andy Gemmill

[0 : 00] The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. We've just sung, Heavenly Father, words about one who came into the world to save people, to rescue people.

And we pray now that in the short time we have, this lunchtime, you would please turn our minds to the Lord Jesus Christ. We pray that you would help us to understand him more fully.

And we pray that you'd help us to trust him more earnestly. Hear us, we pray, in his name. Amen. Well, I'd like you please to turn in the Bibles to John's Gospel in chapter 5.

You'll find that on page 890. I'm going to read part of the middle section of this chapter. Let me just refresh your minds for those who've been here before and just remind you for those who haven't.

This chapter starts with a miracle of an invalid man at the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem. And after the miracle, from verse 18 onwards, comes a long, well, really a long monologue from Jesus.

[1 : 22] But it's a kind of discussion between him and those who object to the things that he's just been doing. We're going to pick up today in chapter 5 and verse 24.

Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and is now here. When the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.

For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgment because he is the Son of Man.

Do not marvel at this. For an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out. Those who've done good to the resurrection of life and those who've done evil to the resurrection of judgment.

[2 : 34] I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge. And my judgment is just because I seek not my own will, but the will of him who sent me.

If I alone bear witness about myself, my testimony is not deemed true. There is another who bears witness about me. And I know that the testimony that he bears about me is true.

You sent to John. And he's born witness to the truth. Not that the testimony that I receive is from man. But I say these things so that you may be saved.

He was a burning and shining lamp. And you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. But the testimony that I have is greater than that of John. For the works the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I'm doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me.

And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me. You may have come across the latest in the round of TV performance competitions.

[3 : 41] It's on the BBC. It's called The Voice. And as you might expect, it's about singing. And in many ways, it's very similar to all the other singing shows.

The difference is at the audition level, where instead of being able to see the contestants, all the judges can do is hear the contestants' voice singing.

And they've got to choose whether they're worthy to go through or not, just on the basis of what they can hear. All they have to go on is the voice itself. Not the looks, not the clothing, not the hair, just the voice.

The agenda of the show is simple. The search for the UK's next great voice. Now, of course, many things make up a great performer. But most fundamentally, if you're singing, it's the voice that matters.

In John chapter 5, we meet the voice. We don't, of course, hear the sound, not from where we are, or pick up the tone.

[4 : 44] And it's not singing. But we have the words, and we see what they do. A voice so dramatically powerful that its effects can't be hidden.

A voice that, according to its owner, determines everything for everyone in the end. Welcome to this third lunchtime in John chapter 5.

Our agenda is simple. To let Jesus, so familiar yet so ill-considered, speak for himself. And this week, we come face to face with the power of his voice.

It all starts with a quiet word to an invalid man by the pool. Verse 6, do you want to get well?

Well, yeah. Verse 8, well, get up, take your bed, walk. Three short imperatives. Up you get, take your bed, off you go.

[5 : 50] He's been an invalid for 38 years, and the response, instantaneous. Up you get, takes his bed, off he goes. It's so simple, isn't it?

He speaks, it happens. What a voice that is. He speaks. It happens. And because of that voice and its effects, instantly we're catapulted in this chapter into huge conflict.

Now, I think it's quite difficult for us where we are to understand quite why people respond so negatively to Jesus in this chapter. That we live in an age which is rather vague about God generally, and easily impressed by the impressive, and quite negative about rules.

And along comes a new person saying new things, testing the boundaries a bit, doing wonderful things for people, and we're instantly well disposed towards Jesus.

They thought, perhaps with more insight than us, actually, how sinister and worrying this is.

[7 : 02] Here's a person who seems to be gratuitously breaking God's rules, when it isn't even an emergency. Seems to be overturning what the loving God has said is good.

Seems to be calling himself God's equal. What kind of power is that? Is that good? Or is that evil? And all the way through this chapter, that issue dominates.

Jesus has been saying, I'm only doing and saying what God himself is doing and saying. My words are his words. My words, they do his work. My words, like his, are very powerful.

In fact, so powerful, verse 24, that they have power over life and death. Just as the words of the Father in heaven have power over life and death. Truly, truly, truly, I say to you.

Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. Like God's words, my words, says Jesus, give life to people.

[8 : 08] They're that powerful. And because my words are his and they do his work. And because they're very powerful indeed. There's a lot more to come from the sound of my voice.

You think the healing of an invalid man is spectacular? Well, hold on to your hat. I'm talking power over life and death here. Hold on to your hat.

It's as if Jesus is saying. Now, there are two hold on to your hat statements in the passage we read today about death and life. The first one is big. The second one is even bigger.

Let's look at them briefly. Here's the first. Power over life and death. Yes, says Jesus. Already. My voice is raising the dead.

Verse 25. Truly, truly, I say to you. An hour is coming and is here already. When the dead will hear the voice of the son of God and those who hear will live.

[9 : 12] Life and death. It's already happening, says Jesus. Now, this statement is an absolute shocker in at least two ways. First, do you notice how Jesus describes humanity here?

The dead. It's not a complimentary term, that, is it? The living dead. Not the title of your latest zombie movie, but Jesus' description of normal, everyday human beings.

The dead. Physically alive, dead towards God. Ticking over biochemically. Nothing going on spiritually. Appearing fine.

But, says Jesus, at the most fundamental level possible. Needing reanimation if disaster is to be avoided. That is an extraordinary assessment of humanity, is it not?

It's not a bit like, for example, the average school report. I don't know if you look back on your school reports with pride or horror. So often, the school report, for all those but the extremes, says something like this.

[10 : 25] Could do better. And that's pretty much the opinion of all the world's religions on us human beings. Not bad, but could do better. Could pull his socks up.

Room for improvement. Jesus' assessment of humanity is totally different from that. Dead. Imagine if your child's school report came back saying that.

This pupil gives every indication of being totally lifeless. I see no hope for improvement. What would you say as a parent? Can I say that you will not find a diagnosis like this anywhere else in the world. It's quite unique. No one else says this. And it is not from the mouth of a cynical, people-hating person. But from the most loving man who's ever lived.

Dead. We live among them. We are them. Extraordinary statement. Second, look at what Jesus says about his words. It's just as surprising. He says, my words are already bringing life to the dead. [11:26] The time is already here when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. It's already happening, says Jesus. The dead springing to life as they hear my words.

Now, let me say again, he's not talking here about moral education. He's not saying people are doing better now that they're listening to me. People are pulling their socks up a bit. People are getting their life in order a bit.

Now they're listening to me. No, says Jesus. They're coming alive as they listen to me. It's happening now as people hear my words. It's happened in every age as people hear Jesus' words. Now, of course, we can't see it terribly well yet. If we're close to somebody who's really started listening to Jesus' words, we will see the changes in their life. But it's not nearly as spectacular as, for example, wandering past the cemetery and seeing the dead bodies climbing out of the grave. It's not that spectacular yet. But, says Jesus, it's happening around you all the time. In this age, in this city, in this room even, whenever Jesus' words are heard, life-giving power is at work.

[12:42] And eternal destinies are changed. Already the dead are springing to life through my words. Why? Because, verse 26, I have power over life and death in my words.

As the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself. I have life in myself.

And my words give life to people. Just as with God I speak and it happens. Well, that's the first hold-on-to-your-hat statement about life and death in this passage.

Already, says Jesus, life is happening among the dead. Here's the second, verse 28. One day, one day my voice will raise all the dead.

Don't marvel at this. For an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and will come out. Those who've done good to the resurrection of life.

[13:52] Those who've done evil to the resurrection of judgment. Now, of course, we all know, don't we, humanly speaking, that certain voices are very powerful. Very effective.

Some voices are effective because they are loud. The town crier. The opera singer. You can't do those jobs without a loud voice.

Some voices are effective because they are persistent. The person who just goes on and on and on and on asking for the same thing quite often gets the thing they keep on asking for.

Some voices are powerful because of their eloquence and persuasiveness. Winston Churchill's wartime speeches, for example. In different ways, we all know that voices can achieve significant things.

This voice, says its owner, is powerful enough to raise the dead. All of them. The time is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear my voice and come out to life or judgment.

[15:01] Big claim. Are there any grounds for taking him seriously about that? Well, a few chapters on in John's Gospel. Chapter 11. Don't turn to it.

Let me introduce you to the story. We have the story of a man called Lazarus, a friend of Jesus and his family, who dies. Jesus comes a few days after the death. Because she has seen Jesus in action before, his sister says to him, If you'd rolled up three days earlier, he wouldn't be dead now. And Jesus, in the most extraordinary move possible in those circumstances, goes to the tomb of his friend, orders that it be opened up.

Everybody says, No, no, don't do that. It will be stinking in there by now. He's been dead for days. And stands at the door of the tomb and calls in, Lazarus, out you come.

And, says John the writer, the dead man came out. Dead man walking again. Called back into life by the irresistible power of this amazing voice.

[16:14] And let me say that this chapter, chapter 5, says that that is a mere anticipation of something much greater. Consider, when you go to a funeral, to the graveyard or the crematorium, not much is happening there.

These are places of sadness and silence and inactivity. For the dead are powerless to do anything. But one day, says Jesus, that's where all the action will be.

The voice that cried as a baby in the manger will call out. And the dead will, without hesitation, spring up. Hard to believe? Well, it's a big claim, certainly.

But, do you notice the total consistency in Jesus' activity in this chapter? By the poolside. A quiet word. Up you get.

Take your bed. Off you go. He gets up. He takes his bed. Off he goes. By the graveside in chapter 11. Out you come. Out he comes. It's extraordinary, that power, isn't it?

[17:20] Irresistible voice. He speaks. It happens. Disability, with a word. 38 years are overturned. Death, with a word.

It's undone. None of us will resist the power of that voice. He will speak. And we will rise.

Doesn't matter how big we are or how small we are. How successful or unsuccessful our lives have looked. How full of joy or sadness. How timely or untimely our death was.

That voice will call us back into being. And we will be powerless to resist. Now, how does that grab you?

Well, can I say we rightly fear power. We are rightly suspicious also of claims to power.

[18:21] And absolute power. And those who claim it. Are perhaps the things we are most suspicious of all about. How far do you have to look in life. To see power that you are deeply worried about.

Well, I reckon about as far as the first really powerful person you cast your eye on. Isn't that right? Political power. Military power. Financial power.

I don't imagine that any of those conjure up positive images for you. What about the unchallengeably powerful person? Can you think of a single example.

In the whole of humanity. In the last century. Where unchallengeable power. Has been anything but disastrous. For the human beings under it.

Can you think of one example? I can't. Seems to me the greater the power. The greater the carnage. With human beings. We fear the powerful. For obvious reasons.

[19:24] Those who claim great power. Are often pathologically self-absorbed. And insecure.

Those who wield great power. Often wield it for their own benefit. To the destruction of those under them.

Such is the deadness of humanity. We recognize that deadness about humanity. Don't we? Evil. Give a human being unchallengeable power.

And we know. That fearful things always happen. That of course is why we do democracy. Isn't it? It isn't primarily an exercise in the empowerment of the many.

But in the containing of the few. So what about this power? Is it possible? Is it possible? That the power of this irresistible voice could be well used.

And kindly wielded. Is that possible in a world like ours? Well of course we only have a little snapshot in this chapter. Of this voice in action. There's much more to look at.

[20:24] Please do look at the rest of the information we have about Jesus. If you're here looking into Jesus for the first time. But while we are here in this chapter. Let's look at what we have got in front of us.

Does this person look like a self-appointed egomaniac? Well consider his words for a moment. Look at verse 19 for example. Truly I say to you.

The son can do nothing of his own accord. But only what he sees his father doing. Now can I just point out how unusual it is. For the very powerful.

To acknowledge the power of others. Not to be threatened by the power of others. Not to be in competition with the power of others. But Jesus doesn't seem to be.

All the way through this section. This supremely powerful son. Defers to his father. Consistently. There's no hint of competition.

[21:22] There's no hint of insecurity. Well look at verse 30. I can do nothing on my own. As I hear I judge. And my judgment is just. Because I'm not seeking my own will. But to please him who sent me.

He's so refreshingly unself-absorbed. For a powerful person isn't he? Well consider his witnesses. Now we haven't got time to look at this in any detail.

But Jesus goes to some lengths. In the part we read out. To make the point that he isn't self-appointed. Look at verse 31. If I alone bear witness to myself.

My testimony is not deemed true. In other words. It's not good enough for me. Just to say big things about myself. Why should you listen to that? That's not valid. And he makes the point.

That in various ways. God has borne witness. To the fact that Jesus is who he says he is. Verse 32. God sent a messenger. There is another who bears witness about me.

[22 : 23] I know that the testimony that he bears about me is true. You sent to him to John. And he's borne witness to the truth. Not that the testimony I receive is from man. But I say these things so that you may be saved.

He was a burning and shining lamp. And you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. God sent a messenger. John the Baptist. He was sent as a forerunner. A herald.

Somebody to announce that the king is coming and is here. Why was that done? Not says Jesus. Verse 34. Because I need human announcement or adulation.

But so that you might pay attention. And be saved. Second. God gave works. Look at verse 36. But the testimony that I have is greater than that of John.

For the works that the father has given me to accomplish. The very works that I am doing bear witness about me. That the father himself has sent me.

[23 : 24] Jesus records. John in his gospel records a number of the works of Jesus. And it's very difficult not to look at them and ask the question. Who is that? Who is that?

Where did he come from the person that can do all that stuff? Third. God spoke words. Verse 37. The father who sent me has himself borne witness about me.

I think here Jesus is pointing back to his baptism. Where a voice comes from heaven. This is my son. This is my son. This is my love. With him I am well pleased. Let me just make the point.

Jesus argues that he is not self appointed. Others have been sent. Other information has been given to bear witness to him.

Well let me ask. Is he a cruel despot then? You don't have to be self appointed. To wield power. Cruelly. And in a self centered way.

[24 : 23] Is Jesus cruel and self centered. In the way he wields his power. Well let me mention two things. Think of the miracle that kicked off this chapter.

It was so un-showy. It was done on the quiet. A quiet word to an individual in need by the side of the pool.

Want to be well? Well up you get. Take your bed. Off you go. And it is very difficult to look at that and say to yourself. Ha. What an egotist.

What a despot. I'd worry about him being in charge. Difficult to come to that conclusion isn't it? His action is so undemonstrative.

And more than that. It's kind. Is it not? What's not to like. About the way that power is being used. Or think ahead.

[25 : 22] Think down the line. To how that power is used in the rest of John's gospel. Resolutely and with great determination. And courage.

Jesus proceeds. Not. To massive. Overwhelming. Enemy crushing victory. Though frankly. What's to stop him doing that.

With a voice like his. But rather. To humiliation. And crucifixion. Which all the way through. He says. Is being done. In order that. On the great day. When he calls the dead. And they jump out to judgment. They might have life. And not judgment.

What's not to like. About the way that power is being wielded. Huge power. He speaks. It happens. Just like that. He can do anything he wants.

[26 : 19] But used so kindly. And in the end. To soak up in himself. Tremendous hostility.

And sin. And human rebellion. Bearing them powerfully. In his own humiliation. And death. And doing that for the good.

For the ultimate salvation. And sinful life. And eternal life. Of a dying. And sinful world. Is that not amazing? An extraordinary way.

To exercise power. Like his. Of course. Just because we can see it. On the page. Doesn't mean we'll take it to heart. Does it? It's all very well.

Reading it. Another thing. Responding to it. And submitting to it. Let me illustrate. To close. One of the best. Ghost story films. I've seen.

[27 : 16] Is a film called. The sixth sense. I won't bore you. With the details. But in it. There is a troubled. Little boy. With an unusual gift. And as the story unfolds.

He eventually. Confides. To another central character. What it is. That troubles him. I see dead people. Everywhere.

They don't know they're dead. They only see. What they want to see. Here. Not from the mouth. Of a troubled little boy.

In a fictional story. But from the lips. Of Jesus. Very similar words. The dead. That is who we are. Everywhere. And so often. We don't know we're dead. And we see. Only what we want to see. Of course reality.

[28 : 19] When you see it. Is uncomfortable. Tremendous power. But ultimately. Wonderfully reassuring. Because of the way it's used.

Let's pray together. Father. Do not marvel at this.

For an hour is coming. When all who are in the tombs. Will hear his voice. And come out. We thank you.

Heavenly Father. For. This extraordinary chapter. And this extraordinary. Son of yours. The one with such a voice. We thank you.

That the power of his voice. Is wielded. Generously. And kindly. And for the benefit. Of those. Who are naturally. Dead.

[29 : 21] And hate him. Help us please. Not merely to be people. Who see what we want to see. But see Jesus. For who he really is.

And respond rightly to him. Hear us we pray in his name. Amen.