

One thing you can be sure of with Ezekiel – he does a good vision. At the start of his book he described the extraordinary winged and wheeled apparition of the four living creatures in the presence of what was something like – looked like – seemed to be - clothed in splendour and was ‘the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord’. The vision was so overwhelming that he fell to the ground, and ‘someone’ spoke to him. Ezekiel was so overcome that at this stage he did not even dare to identify the entity that spoke to him as God. That first sentence in our reading isn’t in the Bible – it’s a bit of context put in by the compilers of the lectionary.

Paulk is uncharacteristically cagey in his description as well: ‘I knew a person in Christ...(who) heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.’ These verses about ‘a person in Christ’ read oddly. It’s almost like the person who buttonholes a doctor or lawyer at a party and says ‘There’s this friend of mine who’s got such and such a problem; what do you think they should do?’ and you know perfectly well that they are talking about themselves but are too embarrassed to admit it. Paul seems to give himself away a couple of verses later: ‘to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh.’ It’s pretty clear that Paul himself had the vision. If it was his experience on the road to Damascus, he too fell to the ground, and in writing of it he too doesn’t identify the voice that spoke to him as God.

There’s a link. Both Ezekiel and Paul believed that the speaker was God, even if they don’t say so. Both would have been aware of the Jewish belief that ‘you cannot see God and live’ and would have known of the people for whom that was not true: Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, for example, and would know that those visions were calls to prophecy. Ezekiel and Paul too were being called to be messengers of God.

But when Jesus went back to Nazareth there was a different reaction. Despite his reputation for teaching and healing, the local people did not realise that they were hearing the voice of God’s son. How could they? They knew his family, some of them would have gone to school and played with him. They’d all seemed quite ordinary when he was growing up. (Well – OK – there was that rumour about Mary having got pregnant before she was married, but she wasn’t the first girl to have that problem and anyway, they were a thoroughly respectable family now.) It’s interesting, by the way, that they describe Jesus as ‘the carpenter, the son of Mary’, which suggests that Joseph had died some time before and that perhaps Jesus had taken over the family business. Nobody, reasonably, expects the bloke next door to be the Messiah. They simply didn’t believe him, so Jesus had no power. Remember that in almost every miracle someone believed that Jesus could do the impossible: ‘Your faith has made you whole’.

Ezekiel trusted his vision of God and the words God spoke to him. God commissioned him as a prophet and commanded him to do some very strange things: tying him up and making him lie on his side for months on end, shaving his head and beard with a sword and burning the hair, digging through a wall and carrying his baggage through the hole in the dark. These and many other actions were symbolic, a warning message. No matter how uncomfortable his instructions were, Ezekiel did what was asked of him, because he trusted God.

Once Paul had heard God, in the person of Jesus, talking to him on the Damascus road, and had followed through on his vision, he wasn’t commanded to carry out extraordinary actions. His commission was to travel and to preach. This was risky and dangerous; his writings give a good idea of the difficulties he encountered, culminating in imprisonment and eventual

martyrdom. He endured it all with fortitude and even enthusiasm, despite that thorn in the flesh, because he trusted God.

It must have been unnerving for the disciples suddenly to be expected to do what they had seen Jesus do. They had not seen a tremendous vision or heard a voice from heaven giving them orders – just a man saying: ‘Go out and preach repentance, heal the sick and cast out demons. Don’t take anything with you – just go!’ But they trusted him, and it worked.

What does this say for us? We should not, on the whole, expect to see extraordinary visions. If we do and we tell anyone about them, we are quite likely to be thought to have lost our marbles or to have been smoking whacky baccy. Ezekiel today would certainly be referred to an acute psychiatric ward. But God does speak to us, and if we are alert and open-minded enough, we will sometimes hear him. It may be a voice – perhaps the still small voice in the silence; perhaps a phrase from a reading or sermon or something which on the surface is not ‘religious’ at all but which suddenly strikes home. It might be something said directly to us by someone else. God’s messengers come in many guises. It may be a feeling of reassurance, determination or utter conviction. It may have to be repeated many times before we take it in. It should probably be checked out with someone else – it’s all too easy to be convinced that God is telling you to do something you really wanted to do anyway. Jesus sent his disciples out in pairs, not least so they could discuss what was happening. However the message comes, the key is to recognise it, accept it, sit with it, pray about it and, as it says in Proverbs: ‘Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not rely on your own understanding.’