

From *The Idea of Revelation in Recent Thought*, by John Baillie (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956), pp. 134-48.

THE CHALLENGE OF REVELATION

by John Baillie

It may be well if, before concluding, we should now endeavour to approach the whole question of revelation from a less abstract and more personal point of view than that which has necessarily engaged our attention in the preceding chapters; and to consider in as realistic a way as possible the challenge to each one of us individually that is contained in the impingement of the divine upon our daily life. I shall suggest that this challenge is perfectly summed up in two words that constantly recur in the Bible, in the closest association with one another—the words "listen" and "obey." The Authorized Version uses the word "hearken" instead of "listen," and it says "hearken diligently" where we should say "listen carefully," but of course the meaning is the same. To listen and obey—that, according to the Bible, is what is required of us. Yes, but what else? The answer is, nothing else. Nothing at all but to listen carefully for the voice of God, and then to act in accordance with what we hear. Speaking of faith as the response to revelation, Dr. Brunner writes in one of his books that "Faith is obedience; nothing else; literally nothing else at all." [Brunner, *Der Mittler* (Tubingen, 1927)] In another of his books he repeats this, saying that "Faith is obedience, just as in its turn obedience is genuine only when it is faith"; but he now adds that "it is impossible for us to resolve the two words into one," because faith apprehends the indicative of the divine promise, whereas obedience is to the imperative of the divine command, and we are obliged to continue in this back-and-forth movement between indicative and imperative. [Brunner, *Das Gebot und die Ordnungen* (Tubingen, 1932), p. 68.] We may say, then, that in revelation we are addressed in both the indicative and the imperative moods, and that what is required of us is that we should listen to the indicative and obey the imperative. "If thou wilt listen carefully to the voice of the Lord thy God . . . and wilt give ear to his commandments, and keep all his statutes . . ." [Exod. 15:26] —how many passages there are in the Bible that begin like that and then go on to say that, if we do so much, God will do all the rest! Men have ever been tempted to think that the important thing in religion is to be punctilious in ritual observances. King Saul said to Samuel, "The people of the spoil sheep and oxen . . . to sacrifice unto the Lord thy God in Gilgal." But Samuel replied, "Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams." [I Sam. 15: 20-22]

To listen and to obey, to be alert to whatever God may have to say to us, and then to adjust our lives to what we hear—if that be all that is required of us, we cannot surely say that it is too much to ask. For it means that if we hear nothing, there is nothing that we are expected to do. Surely also, if we took this truth to heart, we should live much less troubled and anxious lives than we habitually do. So often we conduct ourselves as if the whole direction of things were in our own hands, as if we had to invent for ourselves the part we are meant to play, as if the whole of human destiny depended upon the exercise of human wit. Small wonder, then, that we enjoy so little calm and peace of mind, that

we are so feverish in our activity, that our nerves are overwrought and the muscles of our hearts over-strained. As Wordsworth wrote as long ago as 1798, believing as we do

That nothing of itself will come,
But we must still be seeking,

we refuse to "feed this mind of ours/In a wise passiveness." [*Expostulation and Reply*] And we are even further from enjoying the experience of the Hebrew prophet, "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee, because he trusteth in thee." [Isa. 26:3]

Ah yes, we may reply, that would indeed be an experience to enjoy, but is it really available to us? It is well enough to invite us to listen, but what if, when we do listen, we hear nothing? That, we may say, is the root of our trouble. Harken we ever so diligently, we are rewarded only with a stony silence. After all, has not mankind listened attentively enough these thousands of years? How men have searched for God! How that old firmament above us has been scanned on starry nights with all the agony of prayer! How the paths of logic have been scoured and scoured again, if haply they might reveal some sign or hint of the divine reality! And what, we may ask, has been the result but a tense and oppressive silence? That Sphinx in the Egyptian desert is the true representation of Deity. Upon our stormy questionings it turns its inscrutable, expressionless face; but no one has ever heard it speak. "He does nothing," cried Thomas Carlyle to James Anthony Froude. Even a Hebrew psalmist had on occasion the same complaint to make to God: "We do not see our signs, and there is no longer any prophet. . . . Why dost thou hold back thy hand, why dost thou keep thy right hand in thy bosom?" [Ps. 74:9, 11]

Many years ago, when I happened to be preaching in a certain university chapel in the United States, a middle-aged man, who proved to be one of the university's legal representatives, came to me after the service and suggested that we take a walk together before luncheon. I have never forgotten what he had to say. "You speak," he said, "of trusting God, of praying to Him and doing His will. But *it's all so one-sided*. We speak to God, we bow down before Him and lift up our hearts to Him. But He never speaks to us. He makes no sign. *It's all so one-sided*." Nor was it without real understanding and fellow-feeling that I heard him speak thus, for there had been a time when I used to say the same things to myself. For the same reason also I feel keenly that this kind of difficulty must be taken very seriously, and faced quite squarely without any effort at evasion. Pious folk who refuse to face it squarely show only that they are afraid of it, and give the impression that they are not sufficiently sure of their own ground. Or if it be that they tremble like Eli for the Ark of God, they should remind themselves that the Ark is in God's keeping and does not need their protection.

I can remember during my student years in Edinburgh, walking home one frosty midnight from a philosophical discussion on the existence of God, and stopping in my walk to gaze up into the starry sky. Into those deep immensities of space I hurled my despairing question, but it seemed to hit nothing, and no answer came back. I think Joseph Addison must have had a similar experience exactly two centuries before, only

that he thought he did get a kind of response and so was able to console himself. I have in mind, of course, his familiar hymn about the stars:

What though, in solemn silence, all
Move round the dark terrestrial ball;
What though no real voice nor sound
Amid their radiant orbs be found;
In reason's ear, they all rejoice,
And utter forth a glorious voice,
For ever singing, as they shine,
The hand that made us is divine.
[Ode, in *The Spectator*, No. 465 (August 23, 1712)]

I am not sure that that kind of answer would have altogether satisfied me, even had I received it. Addison lived in the Age of Reason and it was enough for him to hear with reason's ear. I did not indeed expect or desire to hear anything with the ear of flesh—to hear what Addison calls "a real voice or sound"; but I wanted something more than an argument. Yet even an argument I could not at that time get, for I had just been attending a meeting of the university Philosophical Society, and philosophy in the first decades of the twentieth century was not what it had been in the first decades of the eighteenth. The stars that night did not seem to say to me, "The hand that made us is divine."

I believe a great many people have that sort of complaint to make against God. If God really exists, they say, why does He not declare Himself more plainly? Why does He not grant us a more unmistakable revelation? Why does He not make one quite certain sign, a sign that he who runs may read, a sign that would for ever put an end to doubt and afford us what we call "fool-proof" evidence not only of His existence but of His will for mankind?

The best comment I can pass on all these questionings is to say how I have now come to feel about my own early questionings. We ask for an unmistakable sign, but I think we have difficulty in saying what would be such a sign. *What sign would we accept?* We do not know what to suggest. St. Paul said, "The Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom" [1 Cor. 1:22]; or, as we might translate it, "The Jews want a miracle and the Greeks want an argument." But Jesus refused to give the Jews what they wanted. St. Mark reports that "he sighed deeply in his spirit, and saith, Why does this generation seek after a sign? verily, I say unto you, There shall no sign be given unto this generation." [Mark 8:12] Again, in the parable of Dives and Lazarus, Jesus explained how useless and unavailing such a sign would be, even were it vouchsafed. Dives pleads with Abraham that Lazarus should be raised from the dead and sent to his father's house; for he believed that if a dead man were to get up and preach to them, they would at last listen and obey. But Abraham replies, "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead." [Luke 16:31] I have now come to ask myself whether that be not true. I have come to ask myself whether God has not already done and is now doing all He can to make His will known to us—short of denying to us that very freedom of inquiry which we are so anxious to conserve for

ourselves; and also whether He has not already done and is now doing all He can to make His will *obeyed* by us—short of denying to us that very freedom of will which is the last thing we would ask Him to take away from us. I therefore put the question, What more can He do, whether for our enlightenment or for our salvation, than He did and does in Jesus Christ?

What I now realise very clearly, and am ready to confess, is that much of the trouble in the days when I could not hear God's voice was that I was not really listening. I was partly listening perhaps—giving, as it were, one ear to His commandments; but no promise is made in the Bible to those who partly listen, but only to those who hearken *diligently*. And why did I not thus hearken? It was that there were certain things I did not want to hear. We some-times speak of people being "conveniently deaf" to human communications, but there is such a thing also as being conveniently deaf towards God; and it is a malady that afflicts us all. There are certain things we just do not want to be told. They would be too inconvenient, too upsetting, too exacting. The readjustment they would involve would be too painful. They would commit us to tasks more difficult and troublesome than we desire to undertake, or they would interfere with certain indulgences we have been allowing ourselves. The rich young man in the Gospels was so eager to get guidance from Jesus that he came to Him running (who says he was not eager?), asking what he must do to inherit eternal life. He had his guidance, but it was something he did not want to listen to: "Sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor. But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions." [Matt. 19:22; cf. Luke 18:23] But he could never again complain of the lack of revelation.

Yet the matter is not always quite so simple as that. The obstacle of which I have spoken is the first that must be eliminated, and if it could be eliminated completely, the others would perhaps no longer give us pause. But other obstacles there are. I am indeed sure that much of my own trouble was of the same kind as the rich young man's; but it was also due in part to certain wrong-headed and illusory ideas that I had imbibed from the spirit of the age and from the philosophies that were then in vogue. Our intellectual sophistication is nowadays so great that it is difficult to achieve, or to recover, that naked contact of our minds with the confronting reality out of which true wisdom can alone be born. Jesus said, "Except ye become as little children..." [Matt. 18:3; cf. Mark 10:15] He said also, "I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and learned, and hast revealed them to little children"—which we may perhaps translate as "the innocent-minded." [Matt. 11:25; Luke 10:21] Only the innocent and childlike mind can hearken diligently.

There are thus two questions which I would put to those (and first to myself) who complain that they are aware of no divine self-disclosure, or that God does not speak to them more plainly. First, *Are you sure there is not something which He is plainly saying to you, and to which you are not giving ear?* Are you really prepared to hear whatever God may have in mind to say to you, no matter what it may turn out to be? Can you honestly say that there is no voice now seeking to make itself heard, and to which you are not attending—perhaps pretending to yourself that you do not hear it? It may be a sense of dissatisfaction with your present way of living, or with some one

particular thing in your life, and you are half-unconsciously suppressing it. Or it may be some positive task that is calling you, and you are as it were stopping your ears, because the task is distasteful to you. But it is God who is speaking. That is how He always speaks. That is how revelation always comes. We are not so naive as to suppose that God speaks to us with a physical voice—with what Addison called, not very happily, "a real voice or sound." In our earlier chapters we have seen that revelation always comes in the form of a demand—a demand of which against our own wish and will we are made aware. And we have seen also that it comes to us, not as isolated individuals, but in our fellowship with each other. It is through the claims and needs of our neighbours that God makes His own claim heard.

Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungered, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee?

Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me. [Matt. 25:44f.]

No reply is recorded, for there is none that could be given. If I am aware of any such claim being made upon me, that is God speaking as plainly as He is able. It may be that this is one of the things that even the omnipotent God cannot do; He cannot, without invading the area of free personality with which He Himself has endowed us, get any further word through to us until we first hearken diligently to the word He is already speaking. We sometimes say of a man that "one can't tell him anything"; but may it not be true of ourselves that God literally cannot tell us anything? At all events, if there is some voice we are hearing and not attending to, we have no right to complain that there is some further voice we are not hearing. It is clearly absurd to be pining for some grand revelation of God's will while we are refusing to attend to this or that small beginning of a revelation that is already unmistakably before us. It may be only "something telling me," as we say, that I am not using my money as I ought -- not holding it in stewardship. It may be a recurrent doubt about the strict honesty of some habitual practice. It may be an uncomfortable feeling about a certain indulgence I have been allowing myself. It may even be a secret knowledge that my support of a particular political party or a particular system of philosophy has been grounded in motives of self-interest rather than of honest conviction. I would *like* this or this to be true, and therefore I have been trying to persuade myself that it is true, instead of listening to the Truth and allowing it (or shall we not rather say allowing Him—Him who is the Truth) to persuade me. It will perhaps cause no surprise if I confess that in the case of such an one as myself, who have published books, one of the things that prevents me from listening to the truth is my reluctance to revise opinions to which I have already committed myself in print. How far most of us are from the standard set before us by St. Augustine who says to God in his *Confessions*: "He is Thy best servant who looks not so much to hear that from Thee which is conformable to his own will, as rather to conform his will to whatsoever he heareth from Thee." [*Confessions*, X, 26] Here also is a solemn warning which was given us nearly two thousand and five hundred years ago, but which is still up to date:

And the word of the Lord came unto Zechariah, saying, Thus speaketh the Lord of hosts, saying, Execute true judgement, and shew mercy and compassions every man to his

brother: And oppress not the widow, nor the fatherless, the stranger, nor the poor; and let none of you imagine evil against his brother in your heart. But they refused to hearken, and pulled away the shoulder, and stopped their ears, that they should not hear. Yea, they made their hearts as an adamant stone, lest they should hear the law, and the words which the Lord of hosts hath sent in his spirit by the former prophets: therefore came a great wrath from the Lord of hosts. Therefore it is come to pass that as he cried, and they would not hear; so they cried, and I would not hear, saith the Lord of hosts. [Zech. 7:8-13]

But there is no end to the cleverness of our self-sophistication in this matter. We are never such skilled logicians as when we are trying to find reasons for doing the things we want to do. We are never such eloquent orators as when we are telling ourselves why we should not do the things we do not want to do. Here in my own heart I find a Demosthenes, a Cicero, a Pitt in the making—powers that might move mountains if turned to better use! How Sigmund Freud humiliated (and offended) us when he first began telling us that our subconscious rationalization of our prejudices far surpasses in elaboration the conscious use of our reason in the discovery of truth! We do find it quite surprisingly easy to explain out of existence any voice we do not want to hear, any call or any conviction that is unwelcome to us; and almost as easy to reason into existence the voices we do want to hear. And then we reproach Deity, because no revelation has been given us! It would be well if, before claiming that no call has come through to us, we first asked ourselves whether we have not if the metaphor will be allowed—been tampering with the receiving apparatus. Then perhaps our search for God will become rather a search for the thing that is holding us back from responding to His search for us.

So the second question which I would put is this: *If you have listened, have you obeyed?* In the Bible that is always part of the condition: "If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord thy God ... and wilt give ear to his commandments, and keep all his statutes...." That seems to mean that we can receive no further revelation until we have not only hearkened to, but also acted upon, such revelation as we have already received. Nor do I see that we have any right to grumble at such a dispensation, if indeed it exists. What right have we to ask for more light when we are not using the light we already have? It may be that we do not know what we ask, when we ask for a full revelation of God. I can remember being pulled up by a sentence written by the Blessed Henry Suso in A.D. 1335: "Let not him ask after what is highest in doctrine who yet stands on what is lowest in a good life." [Heinrich Suso, *Das Büchlein der ewigen Weisheit*, chap. 21.] Yet here we are, clamouring for the mystery of ultimate reality to be laid bare to us, and not facing up to the little sample of reality that stares us full in the face—the realities, it may be, of the family relationships in our own home! This one bit of God's will for us we do at least know, this immediate duty that lies so close to our hand. But we do not take to it very kindly. We find it harsh and unwelcome enough. Is it not probable, then, that anything like a full revelation would quite crush us—and quite blind us. "Our God," as we read both in the Old Testament and in the New, "is a consuming fire." [Deut. 4:24; Heb. 12:29]

No angel in the sky
Can fully bear that sight.
[Matthew Bridges, "Crown Him with many crowns."]

Surely, then, we had better learn to adjust ourselves to the more commonplace demands of our domestic situation before we enquire after that before which the cherubim veil their faces.

We need not bid, for cloistered cell,
Our neighbour and our work farewell,
Nor strive to wind ourselves too high
For sinful man beneath the sky;

The trivial round, the common task,
Will furnish all we ought to ask
[John Keble, "O timely happy!"]

We must therefore accept the second condition also: before asking for what we do not hear, we must obey what we do hear. We may remind ourselves of the precept which was "of invaluable service" to Thomas Carlyle when he found himself in what he calls "the fixed Tartarean dark" of mid-nineteenth-century unbelief: "Do the duty which lies nearest to thee, which thou knowest to be a duty. Thy second duty will already have become clearer." [Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, "The Everlasting Yea."] Or we may take another passage from St. Augustine's *Confessions*:

Nor had I anything to answer Thee when thou calledst to me, "Awake, thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light." And when thou didst on all sides show me that what Thou saidst was true, I, convicted by the truth, had nothing at all to answer, but only those dull and drowsy words, "Anon, anon," "presently," "leave me but a little." But alack, my "presently, presently" had no present in it, and my "little while" went on for a long while. [*Confessions*, VIII, 5]

In an earlier chapter Dr. Tillich was quoted as saying that revelation always means light on our ultimate human concern. Using slightly different language he writes in another place that "Revelation is the manifestation of the mystery of being to the cognitive function of human reason." [Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I, 129] I have myself confessed that there was a time when I asked myself whether there had been *any* manifestation of the mystery, whether *any* light had been given us on our ultimate human concern; but I have also testified how it was gradually borne in upon me that in fact more light had been given me than I had cared to use. Whence came this light, this challenge of which I was even now aware? I can give but one answer. The challenge was mediated to me by my Christian upbringing, and thus through the Christian Church; but its ultimate source was Jesus Christ. The voice I heard was indeed "the voice of conscience," but it was a conscience that had a long history behind it, going back to the evangelic story. The word that was spoken to me was ultimately the Word that had been made flesh. In distinguishing between what he calls original and dependent revelation, Dr. Tillich writes:

The history of revelation indicates that there is a difference between original and dependent revelations. This is a consequence of the correlative character of revelation. An original revelation is a revelation which occurs in a constellation that did not exist

before.... In a dependent revelation ... the receiving side changes as new individuals and groups enter the same constellation of revelation.... There is continuous revelation in the history of the church, but it is dependent revelation. [*Ibid.*, p. 126]

In the Old Testament it is often said that no man has ever seen God, and indeed God is made to say, "There shall no man see me and live." [Exod. 33:20] This is taken up in the New Testament, but with an addition. St. John says, "No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he hath made him known." [John 1:18] And, according to St. John, Jesus Himself said in answer to Philip's request to show him the Father, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father." [John 14:9] That is the whole essence of the Christian faith, that Jesus Christ has shown us the Father, that in Him there has been revealed to us all we need to know about our ultimate concern. "All we need to know." There is much that we do not know. Now we know in part, as St. Paul says, and it may sometimes seem to us to be only a very small part. Now we see only, he says again, as in a mirror dimly. The clouds and thick darkness remain, and the light piercing them sometimes seems scant enough. But it is the Light of the World. It is more light than we are ever likely to use. It is enough to see to do our work by, and until we have done our work we have no cause to repine. When our work is done, it is promised that we shall know even as we are known, and that we shall see face to face.

"Then said Evangelist, Keep that Light in your eye, and go directly thereto, so thou shalt see the Gate." [John Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*]