

I've always loved the older episodes of "The Twilight Zone" with Rod Serling, as they often have some great moral lessons and cause the viewer to think.

In a memorable one called "He's Alive," a young Dennis Hopper portrays Peter Vollmer. Peter was an abused child by his father and had a mother who was never around, but he had a loving relationship with a Jewish neighbor whom he looked to as a father figure.

Unfortunately, Peter loses his way in life, and starts a gang of neo-Nazis, driven by a desire to be respected. He preaches on street corners but people ignore him and ridicule him.

However, he's visited by a shadowy figure who teaches him how to speak. He encourages him to have one of his followers murdered to create a martyr. He changes his speaking style and his followers begin to grow. At a rally that was paid for by the shadowy man, his Jewish neighbor, Ernst, actually a holocaust survivor, disrupts it. After this, the shadowy figure reveals himself to be Adolf Hitler; and after the rally was disrupted he tells Peter he will be ordering him what to do. He instructs him to kill Ernst,

which he does; Hitler asks him how he feels and he says “immortal.” He’s soon arrested by the police for conspiracy to murder Nick, who was one of his followers, and is shot while fleeing, shocked because he thought he was immortal.

Rod Serling at the end of the episode says to the viewers: “Where will he go next, this phantom from another time, this resurrected ghost of a previous nightmare – Chicago? Los Angeles? Miami, Florida? Vincennes, Indiana? Syracuse, New York? Anyplace, everyplace, where there's hate, where there's prejudice, where there's bigotry. He's alive. He's alive so long as these evils exist. Remember that when he comes to your town. Remember it when you hear his voice speaking out through others. Remember it when you hear a name called, a minority attacked, any blind, unreasoning assault on a people or any human being. He's alive because through these things we keep him alive.”

Yes, hate is alive and well, but so is evil. Through the effects of original sin, people become manipulated. Remember Hitler was elected. And in many respects, people allow evil to triumph or feel powerless in the face of it. Just look at this last week when the reaction of some, when Texas, thankfully,

was allowed to have its fetal heartbeat law stand greatly curtailing abortion, that we need to act immediately to make sure abortion is enshrined in law. The problem, much like in that Twilight Zone episode, is people can be easily manipulated by pop culture, by the media, by people around them. Rather, to understand clearly, we have to listen to God.

And while I've preached before on how things can sometimes seem quite bad in the world, a closer look reveals that while evil has power, when a person listens to the voice of God, they can get past the evil voices that can brainwash and corrupt them.

As an example, we can look to China of all places. On the surface, it looks awful; a powerful Communist party; Catholics and other faiths persecuted; government tyranny. But a closer look reveals something else. A recent survey conducted by the Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing showed that over 60% of students in Beijing and Shanghai are interested in Christianity. And Christianity is actually growing in the country.

Fr. Bao Yuanjin was once an atheist and devoted member of the Communist party. Now he is a priest in secret, serving somewhere in the northern part of China.

He was baptized only 11 years prior to becoming a priest.

As a student, he was the leader of the Young Communists. In sharing his story, he says that in his heart, he had many plans and ideas for the future, but that none of them had anything to do with God, whom he says for him at that point in his life, did not exist.

His family was not religious; he had a grandmother who was Protestant, and he remembers her speaking about Jesus once as the Son of God, but he was not interested in any religion. In fact, he says, education in atheism is mandatory in China from elementary school up until one is in university.

His mind was full of atheist theories and he thought belief in God was something childish, maybe even stupid.

In his fourth year of college, he joined the Communist Party, which is something people in China do to make friends but also so that one can find a job and give them a hand if they get into trouble.

In looking at this time, he says he was struck by the fact that in the Party, while they had activities and events, all that was done was for the sake of the self so you could get a better career. It wasn't done for others. One can't help but think of George Orwell's classic "Animal Farm" where some animals are more equal than others.

He says everyone lied and everyone knew about the lies, but they carried on all the same. The lie would be when at a party meeting a moment was set aside for confessions and self criticism (which never happened as no one self criticized by rather criticized everyone else). An example of this would be saying to another party member, "I must criticize something that you did not do well. You worked too much for us. Yes, work is important but so is your health. You must take better care of it so you work better for the community." Fr. Bao saw how absurd it was, but he couldn't speak up.

One time he became ill, and would have nightmares. He had a dream where he dreamt he found a package. He opened it and found a book in it. It was a Bible, all shining and bright. He woke up and recalled his grandmother was the only person to have told him about the Bible. He remembered her saying Jesus is all powerful. And so he thought well if Jesus is all powerful, he can cure me. So he looked for a church. However a Communist Party member in China is forbidden to be a part of any religion, so he went in secret.

Graduating he found a job and visited his family before starting, who lived in another part of China. Having a month of vacation, he met up with a friend who he learned was Catholic. This friend gave the future Fr. Bao 10 cassettes with sermons from a Chinese priest. He listened to them, and a battle began to rage in his heart; he thought maybe the Catholic faith is the true one.

But he was fearful. He thought of what he studied on atheism. He thought of losing his job. He was to return to the city that day to take a job, and so not knowing what to do, he turned to Mary. He said if you are really there,

can you give me a sign on my trip, maybe an accident or something important.

In hindsight he says I probably shouldn't have challenged God, but an accident happened. The bus blew a tire. All survived but going at high speed the bus turned over; he had to climb through a window. A new bus was sent, and then they went to the train station where he was to continue his trip. His train was sold out. He could get a ticket for one in three days. Exhausted he again prayed - "Help me to get a train ticket. If you help me this time, I swear I'll follow you." He waited in line, lost hope, and a man showed up saying this ticket is for this city (he doesn't share it in his story out of fear of being discovered) and who wants to buy it. He bought it and the man said it was for his friend who was late and it was too late to get a refund. This small sign was the beginning of his conversion.

He took the job, and then started going to Mass in secret. Eventually he asked to be baptized. He found it liberating. It was a real community; not the fake one of the Communists. People criticized themselves, and even the priest - but they were trying to help one another not just themselves. He opted to do something shocking, and leave the Communist Party after this.

The party official he gave his letter of resignation to was speechless; because people just didn't do that. But because a Communist couldn't be baptized and a communist, he knew it was the right thing to do. He continued to go to Mass underground, and then a nun came up to him and said "why don't you follow Jesus fully and become a priest?" He said no right away; for there were no other believers in his family. But six months later, praying in his room, he heard a voice that said "Follow me." He didn't want to; he had a good job, a quiet life. But he listened. He prayed to find another job in a city far away, but he knew what he had to do. He spent five years in a seminary of an underground church. It was risky; wake up at 5 a.m., a half hour of prayer, Mass, breakfast, cleaning and studies and bed at 10 p.m. They did the cooking and cleaning. They moved a few times due to a risk of being jailed by the police. His ordination was a Mass at 4 a.m., a time when all are asleep, even the police.

Now a priest in the underground church, Fr. Bao notes that we need to see the hope, because while persecuted, the Church grows. He cites his hometown, which in 1983 had three Catholic families; that grew to 4,000 20 years later. The message of the government and Communists might be strong. But it can't drown out the voice of God.

The key though is for us to hear that voice of God, and not doing so prevents us from living life fully, but also from speaking about the nature of God to others.

In our Gospel this week, Jesus goes outside of the territory of Israel; we know that Jesus came for us all, which is why He called Paul to be his evangelist to the Gentiles. He goes to the Decapolis or region of 10 cities to the east, in modern day Jordan. Brought to Him is this man who can't hear and as a result can't speak properly.

As a starting point, we can think of that Decapolis as much like the modern world. Secularism can shape so many people; in Fr Bao's case it was formally taught in atheism and the power of the state, but this is so prevalent everywhere. People, as he found out in the party, think of themselves or their interests; others are formed by a world that says everything else matters other than God; or that this world is all there is; or that there are no objective moral truths, so what's right for me is right for me and what's right for you is right for you.

And what happens with this is when we are hearing these things, inevitably we pass them on; we have a hard time speaking to the truth. Hence things like “I wouldn’t want to impose my morality on someone even though I personally disagree with this” or not talking about our faith because it’s one thing among many others in our life or not thought about much; or being easily manipulated because they haven’t really been taught the faith. The bottom line is there is this hearing problem so many have in the world, because so many are led by false shepherds and hearing the wrongs things and the only remedy is being plugged into God, so we can both hear and see clearly and then be able to speak.

How does this happen?

For one, we need to find time away from the crowd and be alone with God. The man is taken away from the crowd to be with our Lord. Who is the crowd in our lives? Like Peter in that old Twilight Zone, sometimes we run with the wrong crowd that enables poor decisions, or we are in a crowd of others like Fr. Bao was as a Communist Party member who won’t be honest with us. Even if we aren’t surrounded by bad things necessarily, it’s

important to find time alone with God and to get away from distractions so we can hear the Lord.

We then are told how Jesus puts his fingers in the mans ears and then spitting, touches his tongue. Admittedly a pretty odd image. But the way to think of this imagery is of God plugging Himself into the man in a sense, hence the touching. It is as if Jesus is coming to live in this man. Jesus then looks up to heaven and groans and speaks in his native tongue of Aramaic and says “Ephphatha,” or “be opened.” We see here a sort of Trinitarian moment; the groan is the breath of the Spirit; Jesus is looking to the Father. Jesus draws Him into the life of the Trinity, and his hearing is restored.

Though Jesus says keep this a secret, of course he is going to tell others about Jesus and what happened. We hear Jesus say this from time to time in Mark’s Gospel because He doesn’t want to be known as just some miracle worker when He is of course the Messiah.

So what it comes down to for us again, is how do we hear, and then how do we speak? In our lives, there is so much competing for our attention, and so much noise to drown out God. How sad so many people are lied to,

and believe the lies. It's how Hitler rose to power; it's how the Communists rose to power and why there is so much evil in the world. Here, while we don't face Communism, what we do face is a culture that attempts to re-define God's law, and with so much secularism, unfortunately so many get duped or just can't hear God at all because from an early age, they don't learn how to listen to Him, or as the years go by they listen to pop culture, the media, and the many other voices that drown out the voice of God. When we hear God's voice, we'll learn what He wants us to do in our lives. When we hear God's voice, we can form our conscience so we know right from wrong, and what the real truth is. And when we hear God's voice, like the man, we can speak plainly and help others to do the same. It's why we can't be afraid to do this in a culture that so often can't hear and may then label us the one who has it wrong or who is deaf to reality to do as you please or not impose morality on others.

As we momentarily come up to receive our Lord, like this man in the Gospel, Jesus will touch our tongue and dwell in our hearts. May His presence open our ears too so that as we leave Mass and go back to the world and our lives, we can hear His voice always that we too might be plugged into the power of Christ so we can then bring people to Him.