

THE KING & I - A TESTIMONY OF GOD & STAMMERING

OUTLINE

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INTRODUCTION

No one was more eager than I was to see the film *The King's Speech* - the story of the Duke of York (later King George VI) and his battle to overcome his stammer.

As the saying goes - 'Been there: done it!' King George described a stammerer's life as '*hell*'ⁱ - and I know he was right. But that's only half my story.

What follows is a first-hand testimony to God's use and treatment of stammering in my life.

I write it to inspire those who feel that they have little to offer in God's service but their *weaknesses* - and particularly those who might feel that their speech difficulty casts doubt on a genuine vocation to a public Christian ministry.

1. THE STAMMERING LIFE

SAYING WHAT IS POSSIBLE

I recall at boarding school twice being in charge of a platoon of Army Cadets. On the first occasion, the various platoons lined the parade ground, and each leader in turn reported either:

'All present and correct, Sir!'

or

'----- men missing, Sir!'

Being unable to start speaking with words that began with vowels, I could not report that **All present... etc.** My stammer left me no option but to report a fictitious number of cadets *missing!* Unfortunately I couldn't manage to say the lower numbers, so imagine my platoon's astonishment when I reported : **'Six men missing, Sir!'** - and I got away with it!

The continuous pressure of a speech defect can force even Christians to lie - but it is not lying for selfish advantage. All too often, indeed, the stammerer loses-out because the answer he/she can *manage* is not the answer he/she would choose to *give!* The stammerer may habitually drink tea which he hates because to say the word 'coffee' is beyond his/her abilities.

DREADFUL DELAY

Here's another amusing incident from my experience as an Army Cadet. I had to march a platoon up-and-down within a fairly small quadrangle. They required the command: **'About....turn!'** (with the word **'turn'** given on the left foot).

I tried.

I failed.

They marched on.

I hastily tried again - and failed. The wall ahead was but three paces away. In panic I tried again...but **'About....'** stayed lodged firmly in my mind, and never reached my lips. I doubt if any platoon in British military history has been marched into such a disarray!

TROUBLE STARTING

There are different sorts of stammering difficulties. Like old cars in winter, both H.R.H. the Duke of York and I suffered from 'trouble starting'. When describing the Duke of York's notorious Wembley speech in 1925 even his father, writing to gloss over the disaster, had to admit to 'some very long pauses.'ⁱⁱ

Formal speech - like military drill, dictation, liturgy, or even giving one's name and address over the phone - often provides no options for the stammerer to re-phrase words that are difficult.

I once made the mistake of naming our home 'Amstel' (after the scene of Rembrandt's landscape drawings in Holland). What a fool I was! I could never say **'Amstel'** straight off! I had always to create a run-in: **'The name of my house izzAmstel...'** (I have tried to express in writing how I managed to say it!)

The stammerer's life is difficult, but the condition is such that much of the difficulty does not get told, so remains unknown. Lionel Logue, the Duke of York's speech therapist, relates a typical stammerer's choice: a commuter had always to buy a ticket for the station further down the line than the one she wanted because its name was easier to say!ⁱⁱⁱ

In informal talking and chatting, we're not tied-down to set phrases in a definite order, and so the stammerer can not only rephrase things but also by-pass or replace difficult words.

'STAMMERING' & 'STUTTERING'

These two words mean the same in general usage - and dictionaries agree. They give no indication, however, of the wide range of speech difficulties that they cover.

Many Christians will be familiar with the useful phrase in the older translations of Mark 7:32 in which Jesus heals a man with an '*impediment in his speech*'.

It is a good phrase, and describes King George's affliction better than 'stammer' or 'stutter', because the King's difficulty was not having his initial consonants behaving like machine-guns, but *getting started*.

Lionel Logue advertised his services simply under the heading 'Speech Defects', and that is another useful term.

To many, a stammer or stutter means speaking like Ronnie Barker in the T.V. comedy *Open All Hours*. It was his repetitive consonants rather than his pauses which made the greater impression - and caused the laughs. For example -

...with her b-b-bare... b-b-bare... b-b-bare... Bakewell tarts!

FEAR, FEAR and MORE FEAR

Although stammering can be very amusing, it means almost constant fear and anxiety for the stammerer. It was my fear of knowing that I could not reply '**Here, Sir**' at roll-calls that drove me to miss every school lunch from the ages of nine to thirteen! The dictates of fear were more powerful even than the dictates of hunger!

In life, one distortion so often creates another. Missing my lunches because of fear meant the additional fear that my parents would find me with their regular 7/6 (38p) 'dinner money' that I could not hand-in. I found a solution. The concept of 'money down the drain' is well known, but I am probably unique in having to do it literally every week during term-time for four years.

WAY OF SPEAKING - WAY OF LIFE

One of my purposes in sharing such stories (most of which I have not put into print before) is to help you see that stammering is *not* simply an agonizing way of speaking, it can create an agonizing way of life. A speech impediment can dictate one's behaviour and responses hour by hour - sometimes minute by minute.

A lad with a stammer might, say, prefer to see Elizabeth on Friday but have to opt for Mary on Monday - because both 'Elizabeth' and 'Friday' were too difficult to say!

HOPELESSNESS before HOPE

This account is not designed to make you either sad or sorry, but to give you - and others - *hope*. But, like all stories of healing, you need first to understand what was *wrong* before you can most fully enjoy the miracles related to it being made so much better.

2. SHAKY FOUNDATIONS

ROYAL TRAUMAS

King George suffered immense difficulties in his early years. His father wanted his children to fear him, as he had earlier feared his own father. He demanded that 'Bertie' overrode his left-handedness - a well-known trigger for stammering. His nanny supported his elder brother, but did everything to belittle Bertie. She would deliberately pinch him if he entered a room with his elder brother, so that he would burst into tears and have to withdraw. Bertie had knock-knees, so that he always had to wear metal braces on his legs.

He developed severe stomach problems, and for a long time suffered an undiagnosed ulcer which meant that his Naval career was punctuated with bouts in hospital.

This is the point to refute a headline in the *Daily Telegraph* recently (21/2/11). It stated that the film *The King's Speech* was wrong to blame King George's stuttering on his traumatic childhood. Such stammering, its headline claimed, is simply caused by inherited genes.

The *Telegraph* was deliberately misleading in order to display a catchy headline. The end of the article actually admitted that *less than one in ten* cases of stammering was caused by heredity. So the film was not at fault at all - and in my opinion the *Daily Telegraph* should be sued for deliberately trying to deceive.

Lionel Logue began his work by successfully helping soldiers made dumb by shell-shock. (Not a state caused by one's genes!) In 1919, an Australian newspaper reported Logue's success with a headline worthy of the New Testament -

THE DUMB SPEAK^{iv}

I believe that King George's speech defect was largely due to the result of trauma early in his life. Such a cause would certainly agree with my own experience which I shall outline briefly.

AN UNPROMISING START

My mother was a cripple and was advised not to get pregnant. My birth was traumatic for both of us. I was dead for a record-breaking time but was eventually revived. (I am still unable to hear on the T.V. the heavy breathing of a diver using an aqualung without beginning to feel faint.)

I also somehow 'lost an ear' in the process, but, thanks to someone's skills, I have no memory of ever having less than the national average of hearing organs!

My father was away from home, and my crippled mother was unable to lift me or breast-feed me. Some of my early needs must have been met by *her* mother who lived with us - but of which I have no memory whatsoever.

Most of my winters - until the age of nine - were spent ill in bed. My strongest - almost exclusive - memory of early childhood was of being feverish. For most of my life I could hardly tolerate the music of Khachaturian's *Sabre Dance* because it resonated too closely with the experience of delirium which is lodged so deeply in my being.

Anyway, until I was nine I was well enough to attend my first school, but only in the summer terms.

NEARLY NAMELESS

The King, when H.R.H. the Duke of York, could hardly start words that began with 'G' or 'K' sounds. He had great difficulty saying the word 'King', so to toast his father's health in a naval wardroom was agony for him.^v But like every stammerer he learned to create his own by-passes to difficult words: he used the phrase 'His Majesty' instead.

I knew the Duke's problem well enough because I suffered my own version of it. My father was Stanley Richards, but unfortunately I could not say words beginning in 'R'! Had my mother married a Richard Stanley I would have been able to tell people my surname. Failure to manage such feats all too quickly result in stammerers - royal or otherwise - being thought plain stupid.

At the age of nine, being unable to say 'Richards', I tried telling people that my name was 'John'! I nursed the twin hopes that they would i) deduce which of the many 'Johns' I was, and ii) that they would merely put down my wrong reply to their imprecision in asking! Sadly, neither of my two hopes was met.

A decade later a boy from another school paraded me - like a circus freak - in front of his mates as someone who, he told them, '...doesn't even know his own name!' Such a situation is amusing to read, but it was painful to endure. By that time I was hardly a kid: I was doing A-levels.

One individual's speech impediment is probably as difficult to live with as any other's - even if the symptoms differ.

THINGS JUST DON'T ADD UP

The Duke of York was once thought stupid because he was unable to answer the question 'What is a half of a half?'

I could have answered that simply enough. But had I been asked, 'What do you get if you add a quarter to a quarter?' I would have found myself in exactly the same plight!

Such situations put the stammerer into a no-win situation. I would know that two quarters make a half - but if you cannot say 'half' - what do you do? Do you round-it-up to 'One' - and be thought an idiot, or stay silent and be thought an idiot? The latter is the easier, because you have less to say.

Small incidents can have enormous repercussions, and in the book *The King's Speech* a civil servant explains the previous failure of his career because of his total inability to do well in Promotion Board interviews. Lionel Logue changed that, and earned his undying gratitude for a transformed life.^{vi}

3. FEARFUL TRIGGER

SCHOOL WON; SPEECH NIL

I suspect many cases of stammering have some sort of 'trigger'. Mine was absolutely clear.

At the age of nine I started a new school.

- I was not physically strong and sported a broken arm (the first of three such breaks).
- Having only been schooled in the summer terms I was a very, very long way behind in every subject. (My first school, oddly, had made matters even *worse* for me by forbidding my mother and I to have any textbooks at home.)

Entry to the new school triggered my stammer - and my vocation. (The Duke of York's stammer began just a year younger than mine.^{vii})

It has been surmised that my subconscious produced my stammering as a 'defence mechanism' - like a notice FRAGILE - DO NOT TOUCH! It was, perhaps, a means of protection. I simply do not know.

What I do know is that I certainly suffered more *with* a stammer than ever I would have done *without* one!

SING A NEW SONG

Singing and speech (I learned in later life) stem from two related, but slightly different, parts of the brain. Hence I could sing without hesitation - as is usual with stammerers.

Lionel Logue wrote in an article -

'People with these defects can, in most cases, sing quite easily and shout at games without any difficulty, but the ordinary process of buying a train ticket or asking to be directed in the street, is untold agony.'^{viii}

God knew all about the speech and singing relationship, so he set things up for me accordingly (although I was unaware of it at first).

On my first day at my second school (aged nine) another lad at the lunch-time roll-call saw me trying to say **Here, Sir!** with no success. He promptly said it for me - and became my closest and life-long friend.

David was a Christian and a member of a church choir. Later that week he took me off with him to choir (much to the delight of my Christian mother who was unable to take me out).

Humanly speaking, David played a key role in my life, for within weeks of experiencing Christian worship I knew that God was calling me in later life to be ordained.

I was the most unlikely candidate imaginable. For starters, I was -

- weak in health,
- weak in learning,
- weak in speech.

(My only obvious ability was drawing, but that was no particular commendation for the priesthood.)

A NEW DIRECTION

Most school lessons scared me stiff. The worst were those in which I would have to speak.

I developed various ploys to avoid these. One was to hide in a lavatory for the period, during which I would give myself an alibi by a self-induced nosebleed - complete with a freshly blooded handkerchief. I had, of course, to lie as necessary.

When, aged twelve, I realised that I would need to go to university to be a priest, my parents asked my Headmaster's advice. He did not hesitate:

'John has not got the *slightest chance* of ever getting to any university!' Professionally and humanly he was right.

I literally *told* my parents, therefore, that they would have to move me to a school from which I *could* get to university. They were surprised when their somewhat frail son did not demur, although it would mean boarding away from home. They probably thought I was unexpectedly brave. But no, I wasn't. I simply had 'no option'. My stammering meant that I frequently faced 'no option' situations, and that may have equipped me in some way.

We know from Mark 10:27 that ***for God all things are possible***. God had other plans for me, which - with perhaps a divine touch of humour - meant that ultimately I became a full member both of Durham *and* Cambridge universities!

My awareness of my vocation never left me, it was rock solid. I believe it was God's special gift to offset the many things in my life that seemed to say that it would be impossible!

4. PROMISE OF HOPE

THE KEY PRINCIPLE

As I grew in my understanding of God and of myself, I grasped a principle which I have never had cause to question -

God does not call a person to do something for which he will not equip him/her.

Dear reader, take that as Gospel, as they say. Then pass it on! It is not my invention. It requires neither a spiritual gift to discern it, nor any faith to hold it. It is plain common sense.

There is obviously much we do not know about God, but if he *is* God - he is not silly! Only a god who was silly would call a person to a speaking ministry and not enable him or her to do it for him as he wanted.

We must not attribute human failings to God. God's reliability contrasts markedly with human behaviour. Our military history is littered with accounts about soldiers' equipment either being lost or inappropriate to the task - for example troops being issued tropical kit to serve in the Arctic!

In the Christian spiritual life, however, it need not happen - although, unhappily, a lack of spiritual equipment seems to characterise all too many churches.

LACKING EQUIPMENT ?

When, as an individual or a group, we seemingly lack equipment for the task God has given us, any of the following may be the cause -

- We may be wrong about what we think God is calling us to do, or, more often -
- We may be jumping-the-gun and trying to do God's will in our own time schedule - not his.
- At other times God may feel it inappropriate to equip us because we are in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong intentions.
- Sometimes God withholds our equipment because we lack the discipline to use it wisely.

I recall a school chum who was once entrusted with a rifle and live (but 'blank') ammunition. He promptly stuck a pencil down its barrel and fired - expecting to put the pencil into orbit. The pencil jammed, the rifle exploded and almost put him into orbit instead. Mercifully he survived.

The best thing that anyone could have done for him would have been to have *withheld giving him anything* until he had acquired the understanding and discipline to use it wisely.

Two points arise from this -

- God may withhold equipment if we have not learned to obey.
- If equipment is given, we have the responsibility to use it only as God wishes.

These two claims are wide-reaching in their implications - and could form the topics for a conference/weekend course.

God, I knew, would provide for me - as long as I was obedient enough to be in the right place at the right time.

I did not cross bridges before I came to them. That was not due to spiritual wisdom or discipline. If you are a stammerer it can take one's total mental energy to cope with life's immediate demands. There is little chance, and no energy or inclination, to dwell on anything that is still 'around the corner'.

At quite an early age I was greatly moved and influenced by the biography of Reginald Somerset Ward. God led him to move house. He ordered the removers who, as I recall, asked the day before the move where his new home was going to be. He replied that God had not yet told him!

I longed - and still long - to have such an attitude. I am sure it is related to Christ's promise '*...my yoke is easy, and my burden is light*'. [Matthew 11:30]

A FRESH START

My entry into a boarding school was little short of miraculous. The Headmaster could, of course, spot a dunce when he saw one, but such was God's meticulous planning that this particular headmaster, Canon Dick Perfect, had the rare discernment not only to spot a Christian vocation when he saw one - but also the courage to foster and enable it against the wishes of most of his staff.^{ix}

I did not pass a single paper of the mock Entrance exam he put me through, and in three subjects I reached only a single-figure percentage.

In the book *The King's Speech* I identified with the Duke of York at the Royal Naval College when I read that he came sixty-eighth out of sixty-eight, and that his speech problems 'were compounded by his dismal academic performance'.^x

My own 'dismal academic performance' did not deter my future headmaster. But I had to work hard. He stipulated that I would from that moment have to work virtually non-stop for him to accept me. I would have to have the equivalent of full schooling (including homework) throughout every holiday with no breaks. If I stuck to that regime of private tuition, he promised to accept me for the next academic year. As so often, I simply had no option.

However lavish God's gifts are there are some things which by their nature cannot just be given instantly. Certain things take time and effort on our part - and academic qualifications is one of them.

IMPORTANT REPERCUSSIONS

My speech impediment had an enormous influence on my life because of the way God used it for his purposes. Here's how.

i) Constant Need of God

The first thing that my stammer did for me as a Christian was the constant need to crave God's help to cope with life. Every time I needed to speak at school (in particular) I would have mentally and prayerfully to beg God's help. This resulted in he and I being knowingly in touch almost minute-by-minute.

It was not that I was super-spiritual or preciously pious! On the contrary, I was always like a person in deep water but unable to swim. I had constantly to reach-out for God's help - time and time and time again just to get through the trauma of what the next half hour would bring!

God had total priority in my life, not because I was special or holy, but because I was so weak and helpless. Once again, I had 'no option'. I had to give God priority because for most of the time there was no other person or thing around that could be of any practical help in my need.

If you think about it there are ways in which most of us would feel able to help someone who is lame, or blind or deaf - but apart from the unlikely opportunity of answering a roll call - there is very little another person can do to help a stammerer.

This can make it one of the loneliest afflictions - as the Duke of York confessed in the film **I don't have friends**. Lionel Logue once wrote of stammering, 'I know nothing which will build so huge a 'brick wall' as this defect.'^{xi}

The stammering problem is largely within us, and so usually beyond the reach of those who care.

But 'within' is very much God's area of operation. It is *within* us that his Spirit works to make newly real to us the Father's love, his Son's gift of peace, and the Spirit's empowering.

ii) Pages easier than People

The second thing my stammer did for me was this. Because *talking* face-to-face with people was an absolute nightmare, communicating with them in *writing* was not. As there was no one present to intimidate me when I wrote, it caused me no fear. Indeed, writing enabled me to communicate the words I could not speak.

In retrospect I can see the following -

- 1) God used my inability to *speak*
- 2) to strengthen my ability to *write*!

So, although I was unable even to say my surname to anyone, I began to enjoy writing and the freedom from fear that it brought.

It was many years later that I noticed some similarity in the life of St. Paul who, in II Corinthians 10, unabashedly recorded what he knew some thought of him:

***His letters are weighty and strong,
but his bodily presence is weak,
and his speech contemptible.*** [v. 10]

The stammering-writing link occurs often. King George's official biographer, the famous historian Sir John Wheeler Bennett, also suffered an unhappy childhood and developed a stammer. He was, therefore, particularly sensitive to George VI's disability and so tended to play it down in his massive biography of him.

The screenwriter of *The King's Speech*, David Seidler, puts the cause of his own stammer down to the trauma of his World War II experiences, which included the murder of his grandparents in the Holocaust.

Stammerers often turn to writing.

iii) Peace versus Fear

The third thing I learned from my stammer was that I needed not simply God's help to speak, but - very closely linked to it - his peace to lessen the almost constant anxiety of a stammerer's life.

It was always obvious to me that anxiety increased my speech difficulty. This is nothing new; Aristotle noted the same thing. He added that stammerers suffered less when drunk!^{xii} That's likely to be true - although I can't vouch for it!

Lionel Logue noted that there was very little wrong with the Duke of York - 'the only big thing is "fear".'^{xiii}

I learned that the less anxiety, the better the speaking. Of the Duke of York's stammer it has been written that it -

'...virtually disappeared when he was with friends, it returned to dramatic effect whenever he was in class.'^{xiv}

Early in the film the Duke of York, in formal dress, invents a story for his daughters, the young princesses, about a penguin. He spoke with comparative ease because he was among his family. For his all-important first wartime speech, Logue put the King into a small room that he had tried to make friendly with soft furnishings, and advised the King just to tell him his message 'as a friend'.

In common with many other stammerers, my parents had little idea of the seriousness of my stammer since I was more at ease with them than anyone else. If you stammer, those closest (who could give you most support) are likely to be the least aware of it, and think you are 'making a fuss about nothing.' (If you find yourself in that position - show them this - and as soon as possible!)

iv) Grace plus Effort

'God helps those who help themselves' is true, but I detest the saying because for many it is misleading. It seems to imply that God loves *only* those who help themselves. This is nonsense; it denies God's love and active presence at those low points when we are unable to help ourselves and need him most. If God didn't help us when we *cannot* help ourselves where would we be without him?

There were things which I learned and adopted to begin to cope with the stammer. I felt if I was asking God's help I could not sit back and wait for it to arrive, but should work hard at the problem in (if I may so express it) practical co-operation with him.

When Logue was asked by patients whether he could enable them to speak like King George, he replied that he could - if only they put in the same 'tremendously hard work' that the King himself had done.^{xv}

SCHOOLROOM FARCE

After my degree, but before my Ordination, I did a year's teacher-training. On one occasion I was expected to give a class a dictation. To dictate leaves no room whatever for a stammerer to add additional words to lead-into problem words, nor any means of by-passing them. Bereft of such everyday aids, dictation for a stammerer becomes virtually impossible.

At the beginning of the lesson I naturally used my everyday technique of run-in phrases to say difficult words, for example:

The next sentence begins 'England expects every man'

The trouble was that my pupils began writing down my verbal run-ins just as soon as I said them! You can imagine the utter chaos that followed:

Sir, did you mean us to write down, 'The next sentence begins...?'

It wasn't simply a recipe for farce - it *was* a farce!

After about ten minutes I gave up trying to dictate, told them why, and explained the aids and hazards of living with a stammer.

5. TURNING POINT - EQUIPMENT GIVEN

A NEW ERA BEGINS

The year before Ordination my first job had to be decided. No such thing as a chaplaincy among the deaf had arisen (as I had once thought a possibility). I had no other option (how often that phrase occurs!) but to say 'yes' to a future curacy, i.e. serving as a number-two to a local vicar. Again I had no option but to trust God that he would equip me to do it.

My Ordination was the turning point. From then onward, I could manage the stammering. God, in his wisdom, granted me what might be termed a ninety percent cure. It was sufficient to manage preaching and leading worship, but not enough to lessen my reliance on him, or to start doing things in my own strength.

As an Anglican clergyman, at Morning and Evening Prayer I had to lead the congregations into saying the Creed and the Our Father. Even with my speaking so much improved, it was quite a strain to be in public and to have to introduce them without being free to by-pass their initial vowels -

I believe

and

Our Father

Like the King's Coronation oaths, they could not be changed, so they gave me neither the opportunity to run-in to them, nor any chance to by-pass them!

[I shall just outline how I managed this particular problem, although I shall leave to the Appendix my Hints and Tips for Stammerers.]

I used my singing ability to launch my speaking. I sang my way into speech by beginning with a very quiet hum. I then went into speech and increased my volume.

In print, what I actually said would be written like this -

mmmm**I believe**...

and

mmmm**Our Father**...

I was delighted (in later life) to learn that I had independently discovered a trick that Churchill himself frequently used! Churchill, as he says in the film, 'eventually made an asset' of his own speech impediment.

Many readers will recall his tendency to use the same hum-in device that I have just described. For example -

mmmm**I said to him**...

mmmm**We shall never surrender!**

Part of Lionel Logue's training of the King involved him intoning the vowels one by one for fifteen seconds. In the film Logue tells the King to shorten his hum - a meaningless instruction to those unfamiliar with the very odd mechanics of coping with a stammer!

ALL IN THE MIND

Those who are not religious would account for such a rapid improvement in my speech at Ordination in psychological terms - 'all-in-the-mind.' They might suggest that after fifteen years my goal had been reached; that I must have felt a new confidence; that I had reached the security of a paid job; that I had gained a certain social standing; and so on.

I would not bother to refute any of those, but a psychological analysis of the personal and social changes on entering the priesthood cannot adequately account for the change.

THE REAL CAUSE

An Ordination - like any human activity - has, of course, psychological forces and factors operating within it. However it would be a mistake to view my Ordination primarily in psychological terms. It was a spiritual event and it requires a spiritual viewpoint to understand it, and spiritual terms to interpret it and describe it.

Viewed spiritually it was to be expected that God's Ordination of me (or anyone else) would result in the giving of new gifts and the enriching of old ones. That is what Ordinations have been about for the last 2,000 years, and God did not suddenly change it in the mid-1960's!

At Ordination Christians put forward those whom they feel God has selected and had trained as potential leaders. They pray that God will equip them anew and afresh with his Holy Spirit for their future ministries.

If my stammer was ever going to lessen very dramatically - simple *reason* suggests that it would be most likely to happen at my Ordination.

- Christians asked.
- God answered.
- God gave.
- I received.

My healing was no less real and no less a miracle because it wasn't total. (It is an error of terminology in one stream of Christianity to insist that a dramatic healing event is only a 'miracle' if it is both instant and total. Jesus's healing of the blind man - who saw *men like trees, walking* - was not instant. [Mark 8:24.]

My experience was undeserved and unearned. It was God's grace at work. God gave me the ability I needed for what he was calling me to do. He did not give me more than that. God withheld any unnecessary and extra measure of healing that might have changed my God-confidence into self-confidence. My new freer state still showed my basic vulnerability, which, when genuine, is among the most powerful means of Christian communication, since it is through weakness that God's *power is made perfect*. [II Corinthians 12:9]

Sometimes my speech-hesitation increased my congregation's expectancy - as both they and I waited for any words that might follow!

6. SCRIPTURE TEACHES

MOSES

Stammering is nothing new.

The great Jewish leader Moses complained to the Lord, **I have never been eloquent...but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.**

So the Lord God gave him a great promise (a text on which my life almost hung for fifteen years or more) -

**Now go, and I will be with your mouth,
and teach you what you are to speak.** [Exodus 4:12]

But Moses was only human, and his past - like ours - tended to dictate to his present, even when God had re-assured him otherwise. Moses let out the heart-felt cry of everyone with a stammer whom the Lord sends to speak for him:

O my Lord, please send someone else. (!) [Exodus 4:13]

In Moses' case (perhaps because of his unique position as the nation's leader) the Lord God *did* allow Aaron to speak for him. But it was no cop out. Moses retained the massive responsibility of listening to discern God's guidance and then to relay it to Aaron.

PROMISE OF TRANSFORMATION

Before the time of Jesus, God revealed to certain religious leaders among the Jews his ultimate programme for the world. His future rule was sometimes called his 'Kingdom', when the world would be 'redeemed', or 'rescued' from the evil distortions which now permeate it.

The imagery was vivid: the dry places would flow with water; there would be shade from the burning sun; flowers would spring up in the desert; lions and lambs would lie together in peace; weapons of war would be melted down; God would be as a shepherd to his people; justice would be recovered; the weak would be strengthened; refreshment would replace weariness; fear would rule no more; the oppressed would go free; sufferers would be healed; and so on and so forth. Everything transformed!

These glorious verbal pictures, presented by poets and preachers in their different styles, revealed God's promised intervention to put things to rights.

The prophet Isaiah sang of God having a special '*Servant*' who would come and inaugurate this massive programme of deliverance and recovery.

Isaiah foresaw the future glory in great hymns of hope, health and happiness. Here are some lines from one of them -

*Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
'Be strong, do not fear...
Your God ...
...will come and save you.'
Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.* [35:4-6]

MIRACLES SIGNAL CHANGE

It was against this background that, about 700 years later, God sent Jesus to be born among us. His miracles are well-known, but their importance lay far wider than the happiness they gave to those that he healed and delivered.

Their importance lay primarily in the loud and clear signal they gave that God's program of recovery and rescue had arrived in Jesus Christ. He was inaugurating it - it was **'at hand'**!

When Jesus began his public ministry he based his manifesto upon God's promises in Isaiah 61:1-2 and 58:6.

***'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'*** [Luke 4:18-19]

It was a potted summary of God's programme of hope revealed in the Old Testament - the coming of his 'Kingdom' - which I have already outlined, and for which Christians so regularly pray in the Lord's Prayer.

Jesus sent an even shorter summary of what he was doing to John the Baptist. It reads in the original like a series of two-word headlines. [Luke 7:22]

- Blind see
- Lame walk
- Lepers cleansed
- Deaf hear
- Dead raised

Because the healing of a speech impediment was less dramatic than these, it missed getting into the top five!

But Jesus certainly fulfilled the Old Testament hope that the dumb should speak.

TONGUES RELEASED

Matthew describes how Jesus held an informal clinic [15:30-31] -

Great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the maimed, the blind, the mute, and many others. They put them at his feet, and he cured them, so that the crowd was amazed when they saw the mute speaking...

The most detailed account of Jesus healing someone with a speech defect comes in the earliest Gospel, Mark. [7:31-37] The man was deaf as well.

As, initially, he could not hear Jesus, Jesus mimed his ministry to him. He -

- put his fingers in his ears
- spat
- touched his tongue
- looked heavenwards
- sighed

and said **'Be opened'**.

...and immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.

The witnesses present were ***astounded beyond measure, saying, 'He has done everything well. He even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.'***

The Gospels mention other occasions.

Twice, according to Matthew, a person's speaking malady was caused or exacerbated by a demon, or evil spirit [9:32-34, 12:22-24] so Jesus delivered both sufferers by exorcism.

Such a direct confrontation with evil threw Jesus's work into the sharpest possible religious focus. Those who could not accept that he was himself God come amongst us, accused him of accomplishing deliverance by being in league with the devil himself! Jesus quashed their theory, but used their criticism to proclaim his role and authority.

If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you.
[Matthew 12:28]

In other words - the long-awaited rescue work of God himself to which the prophets looked forward is taking place right now among you!

The young epileptic demoniac whose father brought him to Jesus, seemingly became dumb only when suffering an attack [Mark 9:14-27]. This is unlike a speech impediment which is continuous. Neither Matthew nor Luke in their brief summaries of Mark's account [Mtt.12:22-24, Lk.11:14-16] even mentions the lad's speech difficulty.

LOOSENED TONGUES EMPLOY

Since the time of Charles Wesley, Christians have enjoyed his masterly summary of God's purposes in the hymn '*O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing...*'

*He speaks; and, listening to his voice,
new life the dead receive,
the mournful broken hearts rejoice,
the humble poor believe.*

*Hear him ye deaf; his praise, ye dumb
your loosened tongues employ,
ye blind, behold your Saviour come;
and leap, ye lame, for joy.*

From 1965, I had a very famous Spiritual Director (the late Dom Robert Petitpierre, O.S.B.) who made me Secretary of a national Study Group which he led on aspects of the Church's Ministry of Healing.

One day he said quite casually to me, 'If, in your earlier years, you had had regular prayer with the laying-on-of-hands, you would not have stammered.'(!)

Said by anyone else I might not have believed it. Said by *him* it ought to be taken seriously. If anyone engaged in the Christian healing ministry reads this, perhaps it is a claim that ought to be kept in mind.

What is the Spirit saying to the churches? If the lives of stammerers can be (as King George said to Logue) absolute 'hell!', are we withholding the first fruits of God's Kingdom to folk (usually male) who go through that hell most hours of most days?

Are vocations to the priesthood (or other such Christian ministries) not being recognized by individuals because the Christians around them see stammering as a static malady outside of God's healing care - in spite of the witness of Scripture ?

7. ENCOURAGEMENTS

Before giving some Hints and Tips to stammerers, I want to share some items of encouragement.

LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

Sometimes God seems to set-things-up. I recall when I was commuting home each weekend from Queen's College, Birmingham to my family in Bournemouth, that I had to drive across Salisbury Plain in a road that passed between the army camps.

In the very early hours of a Saturday morning I offered a lone soldier a lift. He stammered - and soon knew that I understood all too well.

I learned that he was leaving the army in a few days' time. In a stammering way he told me that he believed that God wanted him to become a priest. But how could that be possible with such a stammer? How glad I was to tell him what I knew God could do.

On another occasion I was speaking to a Christian Union at Aberystwyth. Unusually - because I have rarely mentioned it in public - I included a testimony about how I had stammered, but God had called me to be a public speaker! No less than *three* stammering students approached me afterwards...

God's grace does not wear thin. He never withdrew his enabling grace as far as my speech was concerned. Its most obvious display was when I accepted an invitation to do a speaking tour across Australia in 1989. I spoke in four cathedrals, and stood-in at very short notice to be the main speaker at a large Roman Catholic conference. I spoke to Christians of all traditions, and in less than a month I clocked-up over thirty speaking-events, including radio and TV interviews.

If ever my earlier speech difficulty was mentioned, I would joke that the Lord was encouraging me to make up for lost time!

I have stressed the relationship between obedience to God and equipment from God. In retrospect, this following incident seems meticulously God-planned.

Of all my talks I wrote just *one* out in full, and I posted it to Perth (in Western Australia) well before I left the U.K.

The day before I was due to give it I was unexpectedly stranded in Eastern Australia (Sydney) because of an airline strike! But what I had done with that one talk enabled the meeting to go ahead as planned but with my message read by someone else!

The healing of my speech has never been total, but it has always been sufficient.

Logue once urged the King not to stop between words.^{xvi} I was never given such advice - nor, indeed, any advice at all! But I quickly realized that one answer to an inability to start is not to stop! In casual chatting my sentences are still over-long and over-rushed.

I habitually rephrase my informal speaking to avoid potential verbal traps. Some things remain very difficult, of which dictating details over a phone is probably the worst.

But so what?

These are not the things for which I was Ordained, and they do not diminish my Christian ministry for which God at my Ordination equipped me. They serve as a constant reminder of what God has done for me, and as I remember my early years the old adage comes to mind - 'There, but by the grace of God...'

Like all Christian testimonies, its central theme is God's grace, unchanged from the New Testament times. When Paul suffered some physical problem he asked the Lord three times to be free of it. He wrote about both God's response and his own.

First, God revealed to him -

*'My grace is sufficient for you,
for (my) power is made perfect in weakness.'*

Paul responded:

*So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses,
so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.*

*Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships... for the sake of Christ;
for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.* [II Corinthians 12:9-10]

APPENDIX : TIPS AND HINTS FOR STAMMERERS

A. ATTITUDE

1. You're not stupid. If others, in their ignorance, send such an impression your way - treat it like a cricket ball - and wallop it to the boundary!
2. You're a fully-fledged person. I know that a speech impediment is a mighty big thing to you, but it cannot diminish who you really are, or your value to God.
3. Look at your life and alert yourself to which patterns and choices are being dictated by your stammering. Recognizing them is a first step to reducing them bit by bit whenever you are able.
4. Share how really difficult your stammering is with a close friend, so that you can share the little daily victories as they occur, and can be encouraged.
5. Ask God to help you to forgive folk who - especially in your early years - caused you trauma, and seek freedom from resentment.
6. If you are a Christian offer to God your ability to speak, and rededicate your life and your speech to his service.
7. Ask for his guidance, and for whatever gifts he wishes to give you to obey it fully. If possible get a Christian leader to pray for you.

B. PRINCIPLES

Before looking at the practicalities of coping with a stammer, I shall list three underlying principles.

1. No one is born with a stammer. It is something you have acquired - it is not the real *you*. It is a burden that civilized life has put upon you. It is not impossible to begin to shake it off and/or to begin to get it taken off.
2. We know that stammering is a symptom of tension. As for all our ailments, in whatever area, look thoroughly at your -
 - lifestyle
 - relationships
 - priorities
 - timetable

Everyone needs constantly to readjust these for true 'health'.

The benefit of this to stammering is that the better the state these are in, the fewer pressures you have working against you and your stammer.

3. Your stammer is always with you, so although you have little chance to forget it, you do have a constant encouragement to beat it!

Tackle it, therefore, by every means possible, including changes if necessary in the big items listed in the last section - lifestyle, relationships, priorities and timetable.

C. PRACTICALITIES of SPEAKING

Part III of my article 'Reading Scripture in Worship' (available on this website) contains detailed guidance on public speaking, and you are referred to it.

1. SPEECH & FEAR

Since stammering -

- ENCOURAGES FEAR
- BLOCKS AIR

so stammering is lessened if you impose a programme which reverses this, and

- BLOCKS FEAR
- ENCOURAGES AIR

Grasp that, and then you'll find that nearly everything I suggest is related to it.

Fear becomes part of a vicious-circle. It runs like this -

- > I have to speak >
 - > So I am frightened >
 - > So my fear locks my body >
 - > So I know speaking will be now be even more difficult >
 - > So I am even more frightened >
 - > So my increased fear locks my body even more >
- and so on and so on ...

It will emerge below how to break this circle.

2. THE LAST STRAW PRINCIPLE

The saying is: *'The straw that breaks the camel's back.'* Its meaning is clear, when the load we carry is at its absolute maximum, the smallest addition may break us. Read that again, because it lies at the heart of any anxiety reduction programme. In case you didn't read it again - here it is: when the load we carry is at its absolute maximum, the smallest addition may break us.

The solution is obvious, you do everything possible to reduce the load, you are carrying so that you can manage additions to it without breaking.

Let's imagine an exaggerated situation that illustrates this.

You are going to read in public and you are anxious about your stammer, but your anxiety is also about other things because

- you have not rehearsed what you have to say,
- you've left your reading glasses behind by mistake,
- you arrived late because you got the time wrong,
- you didn't have time to go to the loo,
- your car is not parked on a meter,
- you're not certain you turned the gas off,
- you forgot to switch off your mobile which might ring at a very wrong moment,
- you didn't have time to have a coffee when you left home,
- you've arrived at your speaking place and there is a microphone - but you don't know whether it will be on or not,
- There's a huge Bible on your reading desk so if you put your notes down on it they'll slide off,

- You hold your notes in your hand, but your shaking hand makes them look as if you are waving a flag of truce!

- While you could enlarge my list indefinitely,
- my purpose is for you to **reduce your list completely!**

The good and encouraging thing is that nothing on either your list or mine is the result of stammering!

Your difficulty in speaking is not causing anything on such a list, so you are no more handicapped in dealing with them than anyone else!

All you have to do is to get your act together. Getting your act together may be very difficult, but, unlike stammering, it won't be hell! So go for it!

(If you don't mind retaining your stammer - don't bother to get your act together. The choice is simply yours.)

Since stammering is a symptom of anxiety, any failure to 'get-your-act-together' swamps you with unnecessary anxiety - which cannot but *increase your speech difficulty*.

Give your speaking abilities a chance.

Give, say, a future reading-event the time and priority it deserves. Take every step to avoid the build-up of the sort of anxiety-list I have given above.

- Plan well ahead.
- Allow plenty of time.
- Imagine the possible snags and take every step to eliminate them.
- Allow yourself to be neurotic about things related to speaking better - it will be worth it.
- Be thorough in your care of yourself, and every other aspect.

If you are having to 'cope' with a stammer, you don't want to be having to 'cope' with anything else. Here are some things we often have to 'cope' with simply because we don't bother to eliminate them.

Cold (because you're not wearing enough),

Heat (because you're wearing too much)

Hunger (because you failed to bring a stand-by nibble)

Bloatedness (because you ate too much earlier and have brought with you nothing for it.)

Constriction (because you chose the wrong clothes.)

Pain (because you did not re-time your pain-killer pills for the occasion)

I won't list every possibility! My point is clear - to ease your total burden, first tackle everything that isn't your stammer.

This will begin to give you the space, the time, the poise and the air to manage better breathing and better speaking.

Take action along these lines, and prepare thoroughly in every way.

- If possible know your script really well.
- If possible have larger than usual print.
- If possible type it out in spaced single lines.
- Indicate clearly your take-a-breath points.
- Insert gaps between paragraphs as prompts to insert a gap in your speaking.

- Read it aloud, standing, at full volume, at least twenty times.
- If possible re-write the most difficult starts or patches.
- Number the pages clearly.
- Have duplicate text with you.
- Fold a top corner of each sheet so you can turn it easily.
- If possible rehearse in the building.
- Find out if a microphone will be used. If so, insist on a practice with it.
- Learn how to check that it is on and be able to turn it on (in case the person who should do it turns up late!)
- To decide the right angle for your notes, stand at your place of reading. Look straight ahead. Without tilting your head forward, raise up your notes so that you can read clearly by looking down at them. That's where they need to be.
- (If you tilt your head forward, the vital air from your lungs will be trapped behind a squashed throat, and your main means of not stammering will be throttled before it is even used!) Put your nose in the 'snooty' position, and you have a chance of reading well.

All the -

- effort
- time
- care

you expend will shift your life away from the negative towards the positive. It is well worth it.

3. AIR

In the film *The King's Speech* Logue got the Duke of York doing some dramatic things, rolling around on the floor, prancing around, shouting, swearing and so on. This was not inserted by Hollywood to grab our attention, it had a clear and vital purpose.

Anxiety puts our body in chains. You will already realize, I expect, that if you are frightened or anxious your whole body seems to get locked. For example -

- your chest tightens and restricts your breathing.
- your stomach gets 'knotted' and you don't feel like eating.
- you may have a headache which stems from the muscles of your neck locking.
- you may clench your jaw, and lock your teeth together.
- you may clench your fists, and hold your arm muscles in tension.
- you may hold your buttocks tightly together.
- such a locked body means a locked person.

The antics which the Duke of York's speech therapist made him get up to were carefully devised to smash the locks, physical, emotional, mental and social, which were imprisoning him.

Logue needed the Duke of York to go from being completely 'up-tight' to being relaxed enough to speak with ease.

I have good news. Your body belongs to YOU. Grasp this important fact.

When anxiety grabs your body and locks up every part of it, it is trespassing! Your body is your territory, and you can have a very large say indeed in what you allow to be done to it - and what not.

We can allow our fears and emotions to dictate to our body. (That is what they normally do to protect us.) But the good news is that YOU can in large measure dictate what you want your own body to feel.

This is not psychological mumbo-jumbo. Imagine that your chest is tight and aching a bit, you are breathing shallowly because of your tension.

Now use your will and mind to put your body into a different mode. Sit in a comfy chair, take steps to relax your muscles, begin to breathe more deeply and more slowly. A simple process like that begins to put YOU more in charge of your body, and release it from being made captive to your anxiety.

Your body cannot readily feel two opposite things at the same time. Your hand, for example, cannot be both clenched tight and relaxed at the same time. If anxiety clenches it, your will can relax it - and you'll have your anxiety on a leash.

Your anxiety doesn't disappear, or change what it wants to do - it is just that you are holding it in your grip now, not the other way around.

You will realize the importance of AIR in speech, and will see that anxiety and air don't go together. Our speech depends on air being supplied to, and moving from, our lungs through our mouth. If the upper body is in the grip of anxiety the air that is there has no chance of doing anything useful. Your air, instead of making speech possible (by blowing in and out of something akin to a balloon) - gets locked by anxiety in a bony box!

There's no need to do the emergency exercises that Lionel Logue demanded of the Duke of York. Devise your own way of freeing yourself from the chains of anxiety, low self-worth and habit.

At a physical level make the tight areas of your body go floppy if they will, or move what is 'tight'. Jaw, neck, face, forehead, shoulders, lungs, spine, elbows, wrists, fingers, stomach, hips, knees, ankles and toes.

Learn to be aware of what state they are in, and whenever you find them in 'battle mode', use your mind and will to over-ride them and free them up.

Once you have learned to free your body somewhat from the reflexes of fear and anxiety, you can turn your attention to AIR - stammering's greatest enemy - and your greatest helper.

Welcome it with open arms whenever you can. Learn to breathe slowly and deeply - and it will reverse the tendency of anxiety to stop you breathing at all!

In *The King's Speech*, Lionel Logue seemed always to be opening the windows - and deliberately so.

Try and 'get some fresh air' before any major speaking occasion. Take slow breaths before difficult activities like answering a phone, or making an enquiry.

If you are speaking publicly in a church service, use any previous hymns to sing as lustily as you can, because this wakens all your speaking mechanism.

When I began speaking in public. I would know or mark my places for taking a breath. I would glance down at the end of a sentence and not speak anything further until I had seen my chest inflate outwards. This, of course, ensured that I began every sentence with sufficient breath, and if the first word was difficult I knew that at least there was a column of air under it ready to push it out to my listeners. (I was not aware at the time of the use of a diaphragm in breathing.)

Stammerers are often good mimics, and I recall in my late teens getting an Alec Guinness record of him reading Christian verse, and - in private - I could reproduce his voice and inflections. I think this may be a way-in for some stammerers. I guess that its success is that the speaker cannot be both pre-occupied with him/herself *and* the voice he/she is mimicking. It 'takes you out of yourself' as the saying goes.

As I mentioned earlier I have more material on speaking at the end of my article on
'Reading Scripture in Worship' on this website.

SOURCES & ENDNOTES

For my sources I have mainly used the film *The King's Speech*, written by David Seidler (Momentum Pictures). Also the book of the same name (which is *not* based on the film) by Mark Logue & Peter Conradi, published by Quercus, 2010.

The page references in the footnotes refer to the latter.

Footnotes

i p.156

ii p.61

iii p.87

iv p.30

v p.55

vi p.192

vii According to the book, p51, the film made it earlier.

viii p.44

ix I did not know this at the time. My later experience as a public school chaplain made it clear that the competitive traditions are such that no housemaster wants any 'lame duck' to lower the overall performance of his own 'house'.

x p.54

xi p.44

xii p.40

xiii p.126

xiv p.53

xv p.202

xvi p.97