

A Still Voice of Perfect Mildness

MARVIN J. ASHTON

One of the great blessings of my life is to have had the opportunity of working closely with five presidents of the Church—President David O. McKay, Joseph Fielding Smith, Harold B. Lee, Spencer W. Kimball, and Ezra Taft Benson. Among their other great traits, I found them to be humble men—soft-spoken, mild, kind, and gentle in leadership roles and relationships. Intimate experiences with each have helped me to know what I share with you today in firmness and conviction about mild voices.

Personal calls and associations with these presidents over the years have prompted me to appreciate the contents of Helaman 5:30.

And it came to pass when they heard this voice, and beheld that it was not a voice of thunder, neither was it a voice of a great tumultuous noise, but behold, it was a still voice of perfect mildness, as if it had been a whisper, and it did pierce even to the very soul. [Emphasis added]

May I suggest to you, my associates of Brigham Young University, that you listen to your leaders who administer with still voices and humble words. Too often we are inclined to be impressed with the loud, noisy, and

dramatic. Students and members in general are sometimes led away from the paths of success because they are swayed by the sensational and artificial light. Very often in today's busy world we ignore the quiet promptings of our leaders and those who guide with soft words.

I am pleased today to have two of my very good friends, basketball coach Roger Reid and Charles Bradley, his assistant, seated near Sister Ashton and me in this devotional setting. Tony Ingle, the other assistant, would have been here, but he is away recruiting. This isn't a pep rally or celebration assembly. I hope that will come another time. For my purposes and theme today, I congratulate these three men for quiet voices and humble words as they have launched and carried on the BYU basketball program this year. From the beginning it has been and still is a voice of oneness that carries the message: "We have no super stars. We are going to quietly work hard without boisterous declarations or predictions." This approach is

Marvin J. Ashton was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given at Brigham Young University on 20 February 1990.

bringing unusual results. I commend them for their “on the court” and “off the court” leadership.

He Called Me with a Whisper

I had the special honor and privilege of being the last General Authority that President David O. McKay called before his death. I recall with fear and trembling the impressions I can never forget as I visited with him in his Hotel Utah apartment by appointment. He was advanced in years and very weak in physical strength. As I sat with him in the privacy of his study, his body was frail, his voice was soft, and words did not come easily. After sitting in uncomfortable silence waiting for him to compose himself enough to advise me as to the purpose of the appointment and visit, he finally said in a still voice of perfect mildness, “I want you to help me.” That was my invitation, that was my call to be a General Authority. That was one of my unforgettable quiet experiences with President David O. McKay.

After leaving his office, I felt I had a better understanding about the Savior’s calling of his associates. Whether it be on the shores of Galilee or in the shops or paths of life, I’m certain his invitation could have been nothing more than, “I want you to help me in proclaiming the gospel and being special witnesses to and for me.” This experience more than twenty years ago brought a closeness to me to President McKay, a man I had loved, admired, and respected over the years. Before this intimate association I always had the idea that being called to be a General Authority would be a complex procedure.

Very often today as I prepare for conference talks, I find myself turning to the life and writings of President David O. McKay. He had a beautiful, intelligent capacity to not only say things in a meaningful way but with warmth and spirit. He was a gentle man of high education and lofty principles. He had a way of

making me want to do better with each performance and assignment.

I will always be grateful to him because he quietly called me, expected me, and wanted me to perform special service with him. I left my occupation and former business activities and responsibilities to help him as a prophet. Yes, I tremble today in remembering how he called me with a whisper that pierced my soul.

He Loved the Lord

All of my life I had a tremendous respect and high regard for Brother Joseph Fielding Smith as a scriptionist, historian, and writer. He was precise and firm in his living style. What a joy and a blessing it was for me when I came into the Council of the Twelve after two years as an assistant to feel of the sweet love and respect he had not only for God but for his associates. He was kind—at the same time, he led with vision and rigid commitment. He always took the time to express appreciation, not only to his Heavenly Father but to his associates. His kind expressions of encouragement to me under all circumstances will never be forgotten. He loved the Lord, and the Lord loved him. He too called me with a soft, mild voice of deep strength.

I was ordained an apostle and set apart as a member of the Council of the Twelve under the prophet Joseph Fielding Smith. The charges I received at that time are still indelibly impressed upon my mind, particularly to be a special witness by example, word, and gentleness. Also, it was emphasized I was to listen to the still voice of the Spirit, which would now come in more frequent and powerful sequences in my life.

Joseph Fielding Smith received his patriarchal blessing from Patriarch Joseph D. Smith in 1913. Included in this sweet and gentle blessing was the promise that he would never be confounded as he defended the divinity of the Prophet Joseph Smith’s mission:

You have been blessed with ability to comprehend, to analyze, and defend the principles of truth above many of your fellows, and the time will come when the accumulative evidence that you have gathered will stand as a wall of defense against those who are seeking and will seek to destroy the evidence of the divinity of the mission of the Prophet Joseph; and in this defense you will never be confounded.

Very often over the years of our associations I felt the intense strength of President Joseph Fielding Smith as he served in mildness and with a soft voice.

“Tune in the Lord”

On many occasions I have heard President Harold B. Lee share his powerful testimony in perfect mildness. I share this example.

With all my soul and conviction, and knowing the seriousness and import of that testimony, I tell you that I know that He lives. I am conscious of His presence much of the time when I have needed Him most; I have known it out of the whisperings of the night, the impressions of the daytime when there were things for which I was responsible and on which I could receive guidance. So I testify to you and tell you that He is closer to the leaders of this church than you have any idea. Listen to the leaders of this church and follow their footsteps in righteousness, if you would learn not only by study but also by faith, which testimony I bear most humbly and sincerely in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. [Elder Harold B. Lee, Council of the Twelve, April 1968; emphasis added]

President Lee was one of the most spiritual leaders I have ever known. He seemed to have continuous possession of the whisperings of the Spirit. He encouraged me to lead in mildness and quiet patience.

Very often President Lee shared the following experience he had while serving as president of the Pioneer Stake in Salt Lake City. He felt there was a lesson in it for all. He titled it

“Tune in the Lord.” I love his soft-spoken yet powerful counseling in this instance. This experience was first shared by President Lee about forty years ago in an address to the Brigham Young University student body.

We had a very grievous case that had to come before the high council and the stake presidency which resulted in the excommunication of a man who had harmed a lovely young girl. After nearly an all-night session which resulted in that action, I went to my office rather weary the next morning to be confronted by a brother of this man whom we had had on trial the night before. This man said, “I want to tell you that my brother wasn’t guilty of what you charged him with.”

“How do you know he wasn’t guilty?” I asked.

“Because I prayed, and the Lord told me he was innocent,” the man answered.

I asked him to come into the office and we sat down, and I asked, “Would you mind if I ask you a few personal questions?” He said, “Certainly not.”

“How old are you?”

“Forty-seven.”

“What priesthood do you hold?” He said he thought he was a teacher. “Do you keep the Word of Wisdom?” and he said, “Well, no.” He used tobacco, which was obvious.

“Do you pay your tithing?”

He said, “No”—and he didn’t intend to as long as that blankety-blank-blank man was bishop of [his ward.]

I said, “Do you attend your priesthood meetings?”

He replied, “No, sir,” and he didn’t intend to as long as that man was bishop.

“You don’t attend your sacrament meetings either?”

“No, sir.”

“Do you have your family prayers?” and he said no.

“Do you study the scriptures?” He said well, his eyes were bad and he couldn’t read very much.

I then said to him: “In my home I have a beautiful instrument called a radio. When everything is in

good working order we can dial to a certain station and pick up a speaker or the voice of a singer all the way across the continent. . . . But, after we had used it for a long time, the little delicate instruments or electrical devices on the inside called radio tubes began to wear out. . . . The radio may sit there looking quite like it did before, but because of what has happened on the inside, we can hear nothing.”

“Now,” I said, “you and I have within our souls something like what might be said to be a counterpart of those radio tubes. We might have what we call a “go-to-sacrament-meeting” tube, “keep-the-Word-of-Wisdom” tube, “pay-your-tithing” tube, “have-your-family-prayers” tube, “read-the-Scriptures” tube, and, as one of the most important that might be said to be the master tube of our whole soul, we might call the “keep-yourself-morally-clean” tube. If one of these becomes worn out by disuse or inactivity—if we fail to keep the commandments of God—it has the same effect upon our spiritual selves that a worn-out tube has in a radio.”

“Now then,” I said, “fifteen of the best-living men in the Pioneer Stake prayed last night. They heard the evidence and every man was united in saying that your brother was guilty. Now, you, who do none of these things, you say you prayed, and you got an opposite answer. How would you explain that?”

Then this man gave an answer that I think was a classic. He said, “Well, President Lee, I think I must have gotten my answer from the wrong source.” And, you know, that’s just as great a truth as we can have. We get our answers from the source of the power we list to obey. If we’re following the ways of the Devil, we’ll get answers from the Devil. If we’re keeping the commandments of God, we’ll get our answers from God. [BYU devotional, 15 October 1952; emphasis added]

President Harold B. Lee served for eighteen months, the shortest period of time of any prophet in our dispensation of time. He had a tremendous impact upon my life. Among other things, by example he encouraged me and others to be quietly fearless in approaching and

solving problems and individual behavior. At the same time he pointed the way for me to show a warmth and tenderness in working with all mankind regardless of where they had been or what they had done. Day after day, contacts taught me President Lee could be firm and totally objective. At the same time, he had one of the most tender hearts I have ever witnessed. He charged me to “seek for that spiritual plus which will add to your natural abilities.”

An unforgettable and frightening experience I once had with President Lee was when he invited me to come to his home to participate in giving a blessing to a very sick mutual friend. As we gathered with a few family members, President Lee asked me if I would anoint the brother’s head with consecrated oil. This I did humbly and in a spirit of inadequacy. I had never before had the opportunity of having this rich spiritual experience of having a prophet of God seal an anointing that I would pronounce. I recall with vividness even today President Lee’s sealing of this ordinance. It seemed to me he was struggling for words, direction, and guidance to give encouragement to this good brother. I had the feeling he wanted to promise him complete recovery and health from a serious malady, but the words didn’t come as he pronounced the sealing. It was evident as the seconds passed he was not only troubled but groping for direction that would be positive and rewarding, not only to the recipient but to others in the room who had grave concern over the individual’s health. President Lee never did promise health, strength, and recovery to this individual. He gave words of encouragement and touched on the basics of the total gospel plan, but the promise of healing was not forthcoming.

Immediately following this experience, President Lee took me aside in another room and said softly and in perfect mildness, “Marv, he’s not going to get better, is he?”

I responded to President Lee, “No. I could tell you wanted to promise this type of blessing, but it was apparently not to be.” I recall his final comment after we walked away from the family members: “The Lord has other plans, and he determines not only what we promise but what will happen.”

A Prophet of Love

President Spencer W. Kimball was a prophet of love. He loved God, our Savior Jesus Christ, and all mankind. He was a constant example of warmth and Christlike love. His voice was one of perfect mildness, sometimes even less than a whisper. He was always gentle, firm, and fearless. Many of you will recall at one period in his life he was unable to speak at all because of throat cancer.

Here are some gentle statements that President Kimball made just after he became President of the Church. All of these seem to be filled with deep love and human maintenance. His voice was never one of thunder, but rather of perfect mildness and love.

Church policy on excommunication: “I think that it will remain in large measure as it has been. President Lee had felt very deeply that there must be some discipline in order to keep the Church clean and free from the sins of the world.”

Blacks and the priesthood: “I am not sure that there will be a change, although there could be. We are under the dictates of our Heavenly Father, and this is not my policy or the Church’s policy. It is the policy of the Lord who has established it, and I know of no change, although we are subject to revelations of the Lord in case he should ever wish to make a change.”

State of affairs in America: “We believe that our people should sustain all the righteous activities and actions of their leaders. We do not feel that there is going to be any total disruption. We have hopes that all may straighten out well and that America might go forward.

We are teaching our people to be true and loyal to their respective government.”

Message to the members of the Church: “Our message is what it has always been, and our hope is that our people will live the commandments of the Lord. They have been revealed in the holy scriptures and by the living prophets through these many years.”

President Spencer W. Kimball was one of the most kind and courageous men I have ever met in my life. His capacity to meet life’s issues, life’s disappointments, and life’s successes with a proper balance and attitude are experiences I shall never forget. How sweet, how humble and sincere was his leadership style. His whispering voice pierced every heart that would listen.

One morning my office phone rang very early before the secretary had come in. As I picked it up, I recognized the soft voice of President Spencer W. Kimball on the other end of the line. After saying hello, I heard him in his faint voice say, “Marv, I have something I want to talk to you about. Do you mind if I come up to your office and visit?”

I said, “President Kimball, if you’d like to talk to me, I’ll be right down to your office. Would you like me to come?”

And he gently said, “Would you do that?”

Courteous, friendly, and willing to be the servant of all, it was his leadership style to never demand or use the influence of his mighty calling to take the lead in what people would do or how they would respond to him. I would have you know that on this occasion he could have said, “Marv, this is President Kimball. Come down to my office right away.” Certainly he had the power, authority, and right to ask me to meet with him under any and all circumstances, but instead, as I volunteered to come to his office, he simply said, “Would you be good enough to do that?” He had the kind of approach, humility, mildness, and love that would inspire all of us to sustain

and support him and love him under all conditions.

A few days before he passed away, President Kimball was in the temple on the fourth floor with his associates of the First Presidency and the members of the Twelve. He was so weak and frail that there was every good reason for him to not be there. Before our meeting started, members of the Twelve walked by where he sat to shake his hand and greet him. There was almost no response at all because of the physical drain over the last few months. There was almost no capacity to communicate or respond to the present situation. His hearing was very limited, his eyesight was failing, and his frail body was filled with aches. As I shook his hand privately and felt little or no response, I gave it an extra squeeze. I said, “President Kimball, I’m Marv Ashton.” How can I ever forget his last words to me when he looked up just a little and said very softly, “Marv Ashton, I love you.”

A Man of Total Obedience

President Ezra Taft Benson, our present prophet, is a special friend. I love him and have respect for his life and leadership. He has always conveyed to me a relationship of complete trust and confidence. This sustaining reassurance on his part has made it possible for me when in near or distant places in the Church to make decisions and calls that would be worthy because I knew he expected me to do just that.

I have admired his constant reminding to all—not only to his associates in high levels of the Church, but to all members—to work with diligence in building not only God’s kingdom but in improving our personal lives. He is a man of total obedience. I see him following to the letter those paths of righteousness to which the Lord has given him the responsibility to point, direct, and lead. I have seen him cry with unashamed emotions as he has talked about the wonders, content, and future of the

Book of Mormon. Those of us who have been close to him have admired and respected the depth of his comment while we were making decisions of great importance when he would simply say, “Let us do what is best for the kingdom.”

Besides days, weeks, and months of close association, I recall conference sessions with him—including ward, stake, region, and general—where he has always taken the occasion in the beginning to give encouragement and at the conclusion to offer thanks for the contributions that come from us as we make our way. He is a prophet who quietly builds up, delegates, and expects commitments that are unwavering.

I have always enjoyed his referring to me as one of his brethren. I recall telephoning President Benson while I was away on a stake assignment. A major situation and problem were evident. They were serious enough that I felt the need for his wise counsel. When I finished explaining the facts and developments to him, he said in reassuring mildness and trust, “Do what needs to be done. You have my complete confidence and support.”

President Benson’s voice today is reduced almost to a whisper. He leads the First Presidency, the Council of the Twelve, other General Authorities, and the entire Church in a spirit of pure love and perfect mildness.

Now in his ninety-first year and fifth year as President of the Church, he leads in unwavering faith, using persuasion with a soft voice and penetrating humility. In all my years of experience with him, I have never heard him raise his voice to a shout in moments of hurt or disappointment. I have seen him discipline and direct in mildness, patience, and pure love. How gentle, yet powerful, have been his words and leadership.

Voices of Perfect Mildness

These five prophets I have known so well have called and encouraged in a voice and

spirit of perfect mildness. I thank God for them. I pray God to help us remember true leaders always lead with mild voices, love, and persuasion.

Calls and instructions from his prophets are tender and free of condemnation. With all my heart I recommend we accept their leadership of mildness and love as we are invited to serve and improve our daily performances.

God is our Father. Jesus is the Christ. I hope and pray I will be able to declare these truths in mildness, with conviction, and with

great impact all the days of my life. These five wonderful prophets have done their part to try and teach me. Listen to the gentle promptings of the Spirit. Most often our hopes and prayers are best answered by impressions of perfect mildness. I leave you my testimony as to the truthfulness of the Church of Jesus Christ and pray God's blessings to be yours today and in the days to come. May your worthy words of prayer and petitions to God and his leaders be answered in a still voice of perfect mildness, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.