

Thompson, Livingstone, *Speaking from the Heart: Thoughts on the Bible and about being a Christian believer today*

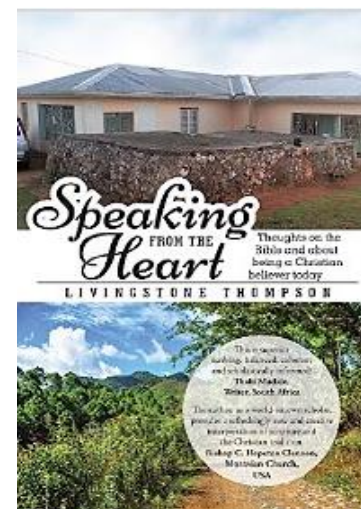
Reviewed by Dr. George Simons at diversophy.com

What does it mean to be a Christian in postmodern times? From an autobiographical and experiential starting point, Thompson takes us on a trip through his own heart and personal story as well as inviting and assisting us to do the same. In this book, he steps away from his previous writings of a more academic nature in order to translate their implications for everyday life.

Not alien to the Christian theme of life as a journey, he speaks of today as a time of wandering, including insights from the experiences he himself and his family have had in the transition from his native Jamaica to his present position in Ireland.

What follows are the highlights and core messages of the chapters as I read them.

After this intro, Chapter 2 discusses "God talk", more abstractly known as "theology", in a concrete way as the faithful person's guide to true North, a compass for the journey of life. He goes on to raise the question of how we set a "plumb line" in a way that make us aware of the potential skews in our ethical decisions, raising the question of "how plumb" is the building that is your life?



The core of evangelism, as he sees it, is the joy with which the Christian life sends its own message. Bias and prejudice are the enemies of true justice and empathy. Here empathy is the key word, as we might ultimately judge our social behavior by the litmus of its impact on the less privileged of our world. Love is not a univocal gush of affect, but a constant energy to be sensitively bestowed according to the nature and needs of its object. There is great emphasis these days on the importance of being positive in speech and action. In a Christian context praise is not only a way of bearing positive witness to what one is grateful for, but also a way of sharing it with others. Thus an essential ingredient of Christian life and life giving is the expression of the spirit generated by the Spirit of God. Without expression, whatever it may cost, it is hard to imagine escaping from the deadly bonds of world politics, greed, and being held in bondage to our own addictions, including technology.

The Christ of faith is a way of communicating the divine. What is characteristic of the gospel accounts and the various Christian traditions is the selection of elements from the Jesus of history and tradition to adapt the spirit and the community of believers to address the ongoing vicissitudes of history. (See my review on "The Zealot" at:

http://www.amazon.com/review/R1QTZLS69XIIM/ref=cm_cr_rdp_perm?ie=UTF8&ASIN=0812981480)

Love of others is not "head in the cloud" benevolence, but must take both the form of providing immediate help to one's neighbor as well as offering revolutionary fervor to one's community for

emancipation from the many forms of slavery both real and spiritual that stalk our world. One must be alert to distinguish godly from ungodly advice to set forth on and stabilize one's role in life and career.

To fulfill one's mission, one cannot rely simply on a handful of Christian nostrums, but dig deeper into the variety of credible resources and models for addressing the shifting shape of today's challenges. Most of our crises come from addiction to the same old solutions, cultural entropy leading to implosion. God's word and reflection upon it, bringing out of the storehouse things both old and new, according to Thompson, will lead, as it has in the past, to creativity and accountability. This takes new forms in the information age.

Death is not the last word – this is the message of the Resurrection story. Belonging to another tradition, I would part company with Thompson on the interpretation of Halloween. Beyond superficial "trick or treat", for me it represents the chaotic and fluid nature of identities, which can be both demonic and liberating. Unfortunately most of the world has forgotten that this begging for sweets is the Eve of All Hallows, the celebration of saintliness achieved in the lives of everyday people. Likewise the rich cultural tradition of *Día de los Muertos* celebrated at the same time, connects families and generations, which despite its grim appearances is not a celebration of death but of life.

One of the most delightful chapters urges us to pay attention the little things and not run headlong and rampant, like the biblical foxes through the blossoming vineyard, destroying the potential of harvest. It is also a warning against the kind of pessimism, unfaithful to the spirit, that threatens future abundance for our world and ourselves.

Is the all-knowing, all-seeing God the precursor to the NSA? Some would affirm that it is this Christian belief that justifies the invasion of privacy so prevalent today. Well, no. The difference is the commodification of information, whether for personal advantage, political purposes or commercial gain, namely, the uses to which it is put. Though medieval frescos paint the Last Judgment in stark terms of instant glorification and damnation, I am much more inclined to envision that event much like the inn in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. I envision it as a place where we are welcomed by the Divine Innkeeper to share our stories with each other, both remorseful and humorous, finding an empathetic audience, now aware of how the Innkeeper walked among us. Put in the words of the Hassidim, shared by Elie Wiesel, "God created man because God loves stories." Judgment on our own or others' lives should not be on a financial model nor in the status one receives or achieves.

Pastoral leadership needs to be developed, as does congregational followership for successful discipleship. Currently I am in discussion about creating programs for the acculturation of clergy and congregations to each other, particularly when they may come from different cultures and in fact may be highly multicultural. The challenge is to find the kind of interventions that stimulate ultimately the power of empathy from both perspectives.

Another delightful chapter is entitled, "The days of Noah". We are fully capable of bringing not just deluges but the "end times" on ourselves, and often it seems we're moving helter-skelter in that direction through disregard, disbelief and lack of accountability, both ecological and theological. Must one always be upbeat? The honesty of hope is not tried by ignoring reality, but by

questioning, even arguing with God, as Job did. The temptation of Eve to harvest the forbidden fruit and Adam's gullible chomping may well be reflected in our destructive consumerism.

Though our ecclesiologies may differ, the search for the essence of the message and the life of the community are paramount, whatever the accessories and discourse, traditional or innovative, used to express them and reinforce them. We fell into a world with potential that has been tainted by human malfeasance—"our fathers have eaten sour grapes and our teeth are set on edge." We may not be responsible for it, but need to be responsive to it. How will we otherwise come into communion with others despite our differences?

Inevitably a book of this nature has to raise for its reader the personal question of where one stands in his or her spiritual journey. Calling forth habits of excellence is not just a personal task, but also a responsibility for those in spiritual leadership, as well as integral to the job description of the *ecclesia*, the community of the church, as we seek to build our identity.

Reading this book in a single sitting no doubt violates its integrity as a meal to be slowly chewed and even more patiently digested. Nonetheless I appreciate the author's efforts to connect the dots of contemporary life with a certain Christian perspective.