

Sermon 15th January 2012

1 Sam 3: 1-10; Ps 139; 1 Cor 6: 12-20; John 1: 43-51

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The story of the child Samuel hearing the voice of God takes me back to my own childhood, to having this story read to me, and later reading it for myself in the Ladybird edition, with its clear images and warm colours. I have no doubt those lovely illustrations have affected the way I read and hear this story even today.

And it is a wonderful story (I mean: a story full of wonder), with its beautiful simplicity and its focus on three characters: the child woken in the night, trotting obediently to the old man; the old priest Eli, puzzled but kindly; and the unseen but very present Holy One, the LORD, whose voice breaks into the human scene.

It's a story that children can relate to very directly, but we need to recognise that (unlike that Ladybird version) it's not written *for* children, nor *about* children in general. I have heard it explained as showing that God can speak to anyone, even children. That's true, that God can speak to anyone, and I suspect God speaks more often and more easily to children than to adults a lot of the time. But Samuel in this story is not just any child.

Why after all is he sleeping in the Temple of God at Shiloh? His story begins with his mother Hannah, who is childless and pleading with God, there at the temple, for the gift of a child. She receives from Eli the priest an assurance that God has heard her prayer, and so it turns out. When the child is born he is dedicated to God, and placed at the age of three in the temple as a nazirite, consecrated to God.

The end of the chapter we've read from tells us that when he grew up Samuel was known from Dan to Beersheba – from north to south – as a trustworthy prophet of the LORD. He becomes the one who identifies and anoints Saul to be king over Israel, to bring the scattered tribes together; then later, under God's instruction, he deposes Saul and appoints David in his place. So he has a crucial role in the creation of the kingdom and it is told in the two long Books of Samuel which bear his name. Despite Saul's importance and David's importance, there is no Book of Saul or Book of David: they appear under the heading of Samuel.

So: Samuel is no ordinary child, even if ordinary children, or their parents, can be inspired by this story. And we do not do the story justice if we break off, as our reading did, at the crucial moment. 'Speak, for your servant is listening' – that's a fine stance, but what does God say? The Ladybird version, like our lectionary, is silent on the subject.

What God says, uncomfortably, is that Eli, the kindly old priest, along with his whole household, is under divine judgement. This is because he has allowed his sons to exploit their priestly privilege by stealing from the offerings of the people

and accumulating wealth at their expense. The story relates touchingly Samuel's reluctance to tell to Eli this hard word he has been given by the LORD, and Eli's awareness that (whether he likes it or not) he must hear this Word. It must be spoken. Later chapters tell how Eli's foolish sons, before they die in battle, let the Ark of God fall into the hands of the Philistines, and how Eli dies of shock when he hears the news.

This is uncomfortable because the child-like innocence of Samuel is brought face to face with the grubby world of adult corruption. It's an age-old temptation of religious professionals, to first create and then exploit structures of power, and the story is contrasting this state of corruption with the possibility of a direct and trusting direct dependence of the word of God represented by Samuel. This trust which he shows first as a child when he opens himself to hear God's word, and to reveal what he hears whether he likes it or not, sets a pattern for his adult ministry as a prophet. Because of it, he plays a crucial role in rescuing Israel from its calamity.

2

In this season of Epiphany – the word as you know meaning manifestation or revelation – the story is given us to reflect on how God's self and God's purposes are revealed. It makes clear that God here is breaking into a vacancy. We're told in verse 1 'The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread'. That translation has a rather banal statistical sound to it: better is the RSV: 'The word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision'. This conveys the sadness of the state people are in: they don't hear God's voice; they don't see visions. It's like when the letter to the Ephesians speaks of Gentiles as people 'having no hope and without God in the world' [Eph 2: 12].

Of course people in this state may not feel the sadness of it. It may seem normal; or even be normal. There are many ways of perceiving God. For some, God is like the firmament or dome of the heavens set up at the beginning of creation, the orderly nature of the universe God has made, reaffirmed every day when the sun rises, the traffic flows, the Dockers lose – again. God is not expected to be met directly, but is the reassuring unseen presence underlying all things. And, if this is how God is for us, then as long as we obey God's laws, for the most part, and do whatever acts of worship we understand to be right, we can expect this unseen presence to be kindly, on the whole, and to forgive us at least our little faults.

This is I think the religion of old Eli, in the story. It is how most people in all religions – Jews, Muslims and Christians – have perceived God through most of history. It is a way which has low expectations of God, but also an attractive humility: after all, why should we demand that God prove his existence by interacting with *me* all the time?

But there are other ways, like that of the author of today's Psalm 139, who finds the presence of the creating divinity in the heart, the deepest places of the self.

For those who share this way of thinking about God, religion is an intimate relationship of love with the mysterious presence who knows us through and through (whether we like it or not), who has loved us into being and sustains us in every moment, who knows our journeys and our resting places, who knows every word on our lips and the unspoken thoughts of our hearts – who (whether we like it or not) knows us better than we know ourselves.

But the story of Samuel emphasises a third way. It tells us that as well as these ways of seeing God, as a constant presence in the universe or in the depths of my heart, God is also a Holy One who may encounter us, from time to time, in specific and non-repeatable ways, who may enter into the world's history, or my life-story, in ways that can have a dramatic effect. It's clear that this does not happen to everyone, but it can happen to anyone, and in any number of ways. It can come through dreams (as Samuel's surely was), or sacred texts, or other people, or events. And it is more likely to happen if we look for it, and prepare ourselves for it by thinking about these things. Samuel was surely prepared for this by his attention to the service of the Temple. Almost any pattern of regular praying, reading and reflecting on the things of God can make us more ready.

But however we may have prepared, when it happens it will be surprising, personal and life-changing. It will be *surprising* because, however we have opened ourselves to God, our expectations or understandings of God are going to be inadequate to make sense of who God really is. It will be *personal*, a meeting, an encounter with the One who is not a what or a why but a Who. And it will be *life-changing* if we first recognise God's surprising presence and then allow ourselves to respond: to accept God's demand and promise for our life. So it depends on our recognition, and on our response.

3

Such moments can come in all shapes and sizes. An important moment for me, which came pretty much out of the blue, was being invited to come to do a teaching job here in Perth. So it was twenty years ago last Thursday that Maggie and I landed with or children on Australian soul. Perhaps you will join us for a glass of champagne afterwards to celebrate that milestone.

But recognising the moment is never easy. In one of his TV monologues called 'The Finger of God', Alan Bennett tells of a woman who keeps an antique shop. It was her husband who set the business up, but now he is dead she keeps it going though she is not very good at it and trade is slack. Her friends say helpfully, 'Why don't you sell jars of jam with little cloth covers? – that will bring people in.' But she won't stoop to that.

She befriends a dying old lady who has wonderful furniture and china, hoping when she dies the family will let her sell the old lady's things; but they send the best pieces away, giving her only a box full of odds and ends. She looks through the box, rather sniffily, but she does find in it one curious item. It's a small picture, a drawing of a finger, rather oddly, but it's framed like an icon, with a pair of doors. The frame should fetch five pounds though.

One day a young man comes into the shop and gets quite excited when he sees this picture, offers her ten pounds 'for the frame' and disappears (promising to get back to her about an oak table, though he never does). Months later she reads in the newspaper that this little picture has been sold at auction for millions of pounds. It turns out that it's a drawing by Michaelangelo; a sketch for the finger of God on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, the finger stretched out to Adam at the beginning of creation. And she sold it for ten pounds. According to the newspaper the young man says he found it 'in a junk shop'. She thinks, maybe if she had a table with some jars of jam and pickle with pretty cloth covers, that would bring people in....

If the finger of God should point to us, for a moment, would we recognise it? When we hear a voice in a dream calling us, will we recognise the voice of God? Will we be like Nathanael in the Gospel, who has gone down in history as a man so stuffed full of opinions – *Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?* – that he nearly missed recognising the Messiah who was standing in front of him?

Such moments do not come all that often, but they tell us a lot about who we are. Everything depends on whether we can recognise the moment and respond. I suppose it might be worth giving some thought to what such a moment might look like, and what it might reveal about who we are, and who is the God who calls us.

The Lord be with you.