

Sermon for Sunday 17 January 2021 – Epiphany 2 – 1 Samuel 3: 1- 20; John 1: 43 – end

I have always loved the story of Samuel – ever since I first heard it – when I was quite young and at primary school. I loved it then because it was a story that showed a child getting it right, and a grown up being wrong. In my world grown-ups always seemed to be right, and I quite often got things wrong!

It's also one of many stories in the Bible about how God calls and uses all sorts of people – and not just the likely ones – to get his message across that He loves and cares for His people and wants the best for them. Here a desperate woman and a little boy – people with no power or authority – restore God's prophetic voice to His Temple.

It's story about God's calling and our response, and that's why it has been paired with our Gospel reading about the calling of Philip and Nathanael as disciples of Jesus.

So what can we learn from the story of Samuel about hearing and responding to God's call?

In the Book of Samuel we're given a picture of a society where people do not seem to expect the presence of God. Indeed, we're told "The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread." (1 Samuel 3: 1).

In Old Testament times priesthood was a family business – and before our reading begins it's already clear that Eli the priest's family was a disgrace. His sons, who ought to have been stepping into his shoes as their father grew old, were out of control. And God had told him so. But he seemed unable or unwilling to do anything about this.

In Chapter 1 when Hannah, Samuel's mother, comes to the Temple in deep distress because she has no children, and is praying desperately, Eli at first thinks she is drunk and scolds her. When he realises his mistake he prays a blessing on her. God hears her prayer and his and gives her a son, Samuel, who she dedicates to God and brings to live in the Temple under Eli's care.

This brings us to the beginning of today's reading when Samuel is settling down for the night in his usual place, right near the ark of God, the holiest place. So, if Samuel is a model for us, what can we learn from what happens next?

Firstly, Samuel is in listening mode. Although he's settled down for the night he is still alert to the possibility that Eli might need him. So when he hears a voice calling, he responds straight away.

Second, Samuel needs help and guidance to understand that it is God who is calling him. Despite all his failings, Eli gives that help, although he doesn't offer to wait with Samuel.

Third, Samuel follows Eli's guidance, and the next time the voice calls, he replies "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening"

Finally The message is difficult, and it makes Samuel afraid because it's a message announcing God's punishment for Eli and his family. But Samuel delivers it faithfully, and thus begins his ministry as a great prophet and leader of God's people. God's voice is heard again.

Last week we were thinking about God's everlasting love for us. About how through Jesus' death and resurrection we are freed to live in the power of the Holy Spirit.

We're not all called to be prophets and leaders like Samuel; or apostles like Philip and Nathanael. Nor should we expect to literally hear voices speaking to us. But God still wants to communicate with us. He wants us to know how much we are loved and he calls us to follow Him. There are many ways of hearing from God. Through reading and reflecting on the Bible; through spending time in God's creation; in times of quiet prayer; as we gather to worship together – when we can – or through the words and deeds of other Christians.

“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening”

I'm going to read again the words that Angela used towards the end of her prayers last week –

“When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among the people, to make music in the heart.”

God calls us all. Are we willing, like Samuel, Philip and Nathanael in their different ways to listen and to follow?

Amen.