

Epiphany 2
18/1/2009

Mark the Evangelist

1 Samuel 3:1 - 20

Psalm 139

[I Corinthians 6:12 – 20]

John 1:43 - 51

The call of Samuel: the bridge to a new possibility of life

On a day when we commission new leadership for the congregation a graphic that pictures someone asleep in the sanctuary may beam the wrong message. But although Samuel may be asleep, and it is suggested the narrative has the quality of a dream, his place close to the centre of faith and his willingness to heed the voice that addressed him are significant qualities for leadership in the Church.

The voice Samuel heard was rare. Visions were unusual and in those days there was uncertainty about God and the direction God sought for the people, but all hope had not been extinguished: the “*lamp of God had not gone out*” (v 2). God was not dead but active: heaven was still open. Samuel heard a voice, difficult to discern, which brought a disruptive message. There would be a change of leadership. The old priestly order led by Eli and his sons had become brazen and cynical to the point where God’s promise to them was being withdrawn. The fall of Eli and his household would be total and his authority would pass to Samuel. In contrast he would be a prophet whose work would be effective, because God would let “*none of his words fall to the ground* (v 19).” This is news that thrills. It makes “*the ears tingle*,” like ours did - on the day Kevin Rudd made the Apology to the Aboriginal people of Australia, or when the news came that Barack Obama had won the Presidency. But the thrill of change involves having to face past failures and deal with the wreckage left by the ways in which life fell short of what was meant to be.

In the past our attachment to this story has often focussed on the childlike simplicity of Samuel. But this is not an idyllic text set especially for children. It is about how the word of God remains alive and active in the midst of corrupt and despairing circumstances. Against all odds God continues to work, to bring down and to raise up, creating new possibilities for life. Because of God’s address to Samuel, a dramatic and potentially dangerous transition was envisaged. Israel would implement a monarchy, like the surrounding nations, but it would raise the deep question of who ruled the people – the monarch, or God who had led them so far. A new chapter would follow, led by Samuel, but governed by the word of God given to him. It was to be fundamental for the people, and formative for our understanding of the relationship between Church and State.

Samuel’s place in this story does not rest on political confirmation or ecclesiastical approval. He is part of this because of his traditional roots: his mother’s faithfulness that placed him close to the Altar and the word of God. His authorization to become a leader is grounded in nothing other than the freedom and promise of God whose creative energy seeks to find a way forward out of decay and impending change.

We shall hear more of Samuel's doings during the year as he leads the people through their struggle with the monarchy. But today he comes to us as a figure who invites us to think afresh about the possibilities that may exist for leadership, religious leadership at that, in the public life of our world. What if faithfulness stood alongside public power to remind it that grasping and rapacious ways, born of violence and continued in revenge, do not bring life and will not have the last word? What if in the Church corrupt and degenerate understandings of faith were rebuked, paving the way for a truly new beginning in faith? As we look out at the world, and reflect on the life of the church, do we not long for a new word from God for our time? But what we seek is less likely to be a novelty that tickles our fancy. It is more likely to be a disruptive, intrusive word, challenging the direction we are taking in faith and life, yet offering hope in the promise that transcends the worst we can do. Imagine if we found ourselves enabled to dream of new possibilities for life that softened hearts hardened to faith, and reached beyond the brokenness of the present to give birth to new hope? Because of God's disclosure to Samuel amongst a decadent people, bound in corruption, and struggling with the challenge of emerging patterns of social and religious life, we are led to see that hope is more powerful than decadence, and faith is stronger than cynicism and grief. We need such a word, such a dream to guide us again today.

The reading from John is mostly about Nathanael who, like Samuel, was a person without guile. As the reading unfolds a certain sort of blindness gives way to sight. At the end Jesus said to Nathanael: "*you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man*" (v 51). John was making a link between Jacob's dream of the presence of God, and the coming of the Cross of Christ.

The meaning of Jacob's dream is that God is restless for us even in the midst of betrayal, isolation and loss. A new beginning, born of forgiveness, came to Jacob because, despite his profound faults, God searched for him. Jesus refers Nathanael to this dream to show that God's search for us is not over and that in the Cross the heavens will be open, and a new ladder will be made between heaven and earth. The Cross reveals that God knows us as we really are and has embraced us in all our pain and folly. This is the God whose word continues to be restless for us and was embodied in a life that expended itself in forgiveness: that is in reconciling, self-giving love. Nothing else has the power to overcome violence and revenge, nothing else is capable of bringing new life and hope to the world. Leadership that is strong will be willing to dream this dream, and work for good in the church, and in public life, staying focussed on the word addressed to us: the voice that speaks from one from the heart of this story.
