

Epiphany 2
14/1/2018

Mark the Evangelist

1 Samuel 3:1-20
Song of Hannah
John 1:43-51

Samuel's Ear

Sermon preached by Rev. Em. Prof. Robert Gribben

Listening is a virtuous act. It takes a deliberate choice, to stop talking, to stop offering your own point of view. It is a part of 'loving your neighbour'. 'Listen, my son' is the first line of Benedict's *Rule*, the guide for monastic communities around the world. Careful listening prepares one for life.

Listening for God is part of this. Generations in the biblical stories have listened for the voice of God in their mind, in their dreams. Creation began with such a word: 'In time beyond our dreaming, you brought forth life out of darkness', our prayer at the Table today will say, echoing John's Gospel. God spoke, and the Word became flesh.

Do modern people listen in the same way? We may have outgrown the pieties of the past, but have we also ceased paying attention? If we have rejected the idea of hearing an actual voice, because people who do are put in mental hospitals, are we not ourselves rather too literal? Do we listen to the word of the scriptures, to the word in hymns and prayers – as well as those of our friends and lovers? Listening for a word which will change our world, the world in which we have sometimes confined ourselves.

For myself, I have never 'heard' God speak in the literal sense, but I am who and where I am because of the unmistakable conviction one morning in Queen's College Chapel that the Law was not my calling.

Do you remember this children's hymn?

Oh, give me Samuel's ear.
The open ear, O Lord,
Alive and quick to hear
Each whisper of Thy word!

[*Hushed was the evening hymn*]

This morning, we have sung Frances Ridley Havergal's *Master, speak, thy servant heareth*, also a touch sentimental and decidedly an expression of individual piety, but both imprison this story in childhood, safe and secure childhood. Such words and quivering tunes remove the sting from a biblical story, and that is a heinous crime. Sentiment can be the enemy of truth.

Our own modernity can also stand in the way of hearing the word from God. I studied in an era when we were told to search for holiness on the streets of the 'secular city'. We were told that the Bible had nothing to say because it was written for a 'pre-industrial world'. So, listening for the word of God in a book begun some 28 centuries ago is a challenge.

We must acknowledge that Samuel's is a *different* world from ours, yet by no means *strange*. Of course, their gods have unfamiliar names, but people of power tried to harness them to their own ends, using human beings as sacrifices in more ways than one. Of course, it is odd that the Ark of the Covenant should be wheeled about in battle

as if it were a nuclear weapon (I Sam. 5 & 6). Fertility has different issues around it in our own times, and so on - but we are naïve if we think that it is not the same human world. Even the desire for a king, which YHWH was so reluctant to deliver, yet bade Samuel do so, was called for because the tribes would like to see 'Israel made great again'. In fact, that is the deep purpose behind the whole book of Samuel. But it's not strange. Its translation needs thought, and imagination, because we too pray for change.

Samuel's saga begins with a tale of a man with two wives, the first with several children, the second with none, and the very recognizable way in which the first exercises emotional blackmail. Then Hannah prays for a child. The text says, '*As she continued praying before the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was speaking in her heart; only her lips moved, and her voice was not heard*'; many people today would recognize that way of praying - 'charismatic prayer'. Eli thought she was drunk; so the crowds thought the disciples were at Pentecost! And we cannot sing Hannah's song of triumph, from chapter 2, without Mary's song in the Gospel echoing in our minds, their celebration of a God who does new things.

The story of the boy Samuel is a kind of dream sequence in the middle of some hard political facts. There are Eli's family problems: '*Now the sons of Eli were worthless men; they had no regard for the LORD*' (2:12). There is the ongoing conflict with the Philistines. A mysterious visitor pronounces doom on Eli's priestly line. A story we thought suitable for children now engages the adults. The LORD has spoken to Samuel.

The first thing is that the relationship of Samuel to Eli has been reversed. Samuel has gained authority, and Eli has lost it. The youth is now in charge; the ancient priest must serve him. Eli told Samuel how to listen; and Samuel stands now in God's presence, his ears open. Truly, as Hannah had sung: the Lord raises up and brings down.

Samuel kept silence that night. Next morning, Eli called for Samuel, with the familiar response: 'Here am I'. Did you hear the state of the nation? (3:1-2) '...the word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision'. The times were about to change.

The second thing is what he heard. Samuel had listened to the oracle which is the point of the whole story - and it is against Eli, his sons and the future of his priestly house. The house of Eli, which had been promised 'for ever' (2:30) will be punished 'for ever'. No sacrifice or offering can countermand that fate. No 'comfortable word' this, for the LORD said, 'Behold, I am about to do a thing in Israel, at which the two ears of everyone that hears it will tingle'.

Remember the strange voice in the wilderness, crying to God to make his paths straight? From John, son of a barren woman - and a priest? Calling the world for a radical change of direction?

We too live in a world where regimes rise and fall, after wreaking havoc among their peoples, killing and maiming, and exiling more. Think Mugabe. Think, the present Ayatollah in Iran. Remember Saddam Hussein, bin Laden, ISIS/Daish. Eli's fall is just as complete; just as sudden. Eli's wastrel sons die in battle with the Philistines.

So, what are we hearing here? The writer of I Samuel is clear that the word of God comes through a human voice, is enacted on the ground by human hands. Samuel - no more than the Gospel writers or Paul - is no mere automaton, speaking an infallible word from God, reliably predicting the outcome. There is a distinction between the word of God, and of those who deliver it: 'God decided, through the foolishness of our

proclamation, to save those who believe' wrote St Paul (1Cor. 1: 21b). And, he adds, the weakness of God is stronger than human strength (1Cor. 1: 25b).

God is doing a new thing, and God keeps God's promises. We may think *our* time is one where there is no vision, when the word of the Lord is a rare thing. O for 'frequent vision!' Samuel's story gives us encouragement and hope. For Samuel is one of a long line of people whom God raises up in history, who are not elected to office because of their genius, or their useful information, or their political clout, or their muscles. God has no time for such things, as the psalmist often reminds us. God is a creator, and he makes things happen where nothing was possible. God can even work with a David!

Walter Brueggemann, the great Old Testament scholar, writes this:

In the midst of all these seductions, however, there is a season of naiveté when a young boy can receive a vision, an old man can embrace a relinquishment, a surprised mother can sing a song, the ear of the conventional can tingle, and life begins again.'

That should be no surprise to readers of the Gospel, or the followers of the Crucified One. The task of the ancient prophets and ours is the same: to discern what God is doing, and listen for the God who is living and active among us, yesterday, today and forever. That is why we read old stories in church.

Because they knew God's history with their people, Philip and Nathaniel recognized who Jesus was, and followed him. We too may listen and learn to be a people of hope in Christ.
