

I Samuel 3: 1 – 10

John 1: 43 – 51

A WORD AND A CALLING

Introduction: We are all aware I'm sure that from yesterday we are now in the season of Winter. But this Sunday also marks another change in the calendar. Not the seasonal calendar but the liturgical one, the one the Church uses to mark time. The great fasts and feasts are behind us and after Pentecost Sunday the Church moves into a large slab of what is called 'Ordinary Time'. This is the time when the Church has no great doctrines to celebrate and few great acts of God to ponder. Ordinary time is our time, our daily life and God's presence and activity in our ordinary lives. Our worship in this time will reflect on the ordinary ways that God enters human lives, and sometimes surprisingly, making them extraordinary.

Our Scripture readings this morning direct us to Eli and the boy Samuel, and in John's gospel to how, at the beginning of his public ministry Jesus breaks into the ordinary lives of two men. But it was the story of Eli and Samuel that captured my imagination. Because Eli reminds me of myself and the church today, in a way that I think many of us can relate to. Let me tell you more about him.

1. Eli, the fallible priest: Eli was priest at the Temple in Shiloh at a time in Israel when **the word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.** Eli, who was old and his sight was dim – (now that most of us can relate to). But he was also dim metaphorically: He could not see, in that he did not expect any word or vision from God. (So he was dim in both senses of the word.) Eli also laboured under the burden of a family that was, to say the least, unsympathetic to his vocation. Basically, his sons were **scoundrels** says the text in chapter 2. They operated businesses out of the Temple; they creamed off the offerings of the congregation. They treated the worship of God as a personal enterprise and Eli seemed unable or unwilling to stop or even curb their excesses. There is not a lot to commend Eli, the dim-witted custodian of Israel's faith and the Temple's worship.

But when the voice of God speaks, it is poor, old, blind and inadequate Eli who, has the wit, admittedly slowly, to discern that the voice Samuel is hearing is the voice of God. Even when Eli tells Samuel how to respond to the call of God, he does not choose to go and wait with Samuel in the hope that he too, might hear the voice of the God, whose servant he is supposed to be. Instead, he sends Samuel back alone, while he pulls the blankets over his head and goes back to sleep. Dim and dimmer he seems to me.

Samuel hears the voice again and responds just as Eli had instructed him; **Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.** Now this is where the lectionary suggests the reading should end, and it often is where our knowledge of the story of the boy Samuel ends. But if we end it there, we run the danger of this becoming just another pious story; a lovely tale about the wisdom and the innocence of children. [I think the Lectionary compilers are being a little precious in not telling us this part of a gruesome story.]

Let me read you the rest of it. *Read I Samuel 3: 11 – 18*

Then the LORD said to Samuel, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. Therefore, I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever." Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the LORD. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." He said, "Here I am." Eli said, "What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you." So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, "It is the LORD; let him do what seems good to him." As Samuel grew up, the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground.

And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the LORD.

This is now a story of God's initiative and the working out of God's justice. The real challenge in the story now is that the boy Samuel becomes the prophet who has to declare the downfall of Eli and his whole house to Eli himself. Samuel discovers that the Word of the Lord is not a safe plaything, nor a merit award for good conduct but the terrible, dangerous proclamation of God's justice being exercised against those who exploit the poor and vulnerable, especially those who do it in God's name.

Some of you may know the writings of Annie Dillard, the Pulitzer Prize winning American author of 'Pilgrim at Tinker Creek' and 'Teaching a Stone to Talk.' One of my favourite passages in that book, is this one.

On the whole I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of the conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies straw hats and men's velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may wake some day and take offence, and call us out beyond our depth, beyond where we want to go...

God is neither asleep nor inactive; not then and not now. The call of Samuel was the inauguration of a new state of affairs in Israel. Through this prophet, God announces that he is doing a new thing **that will make the ears of anyone who hears it tingle**. The life of Israel is changed for the better because God does a new thing and because there is one person, a mere child, who is prepared to hear and speak the word of God, even when that means pronouncing a judgment against his own people and his own superior.

And that child is helped towards discernment by a blind, fallible priest who has just enough faith to be able to discern the workings of God and to accept them. His response to God's judgment? **It is the Lord; let God do what seems good to him.**

2. The Word of the Lord: That is the story we are given today. What does this Scripture say to us in our time and cultural context? How does it address our life and our situation as the people of God today?

First, it calls us to recognize how the Word of the Lord is heard today and our responsibility to listen. God calls people in a multitude of ways but we will not hear unless we are attentive and expectant. Yes, God's call to us can come as a mysterious voice in the night, but it more typically comes through the words of Scripture, directly or indirectly in preaching, hymns, liturgy, and so forth. But are we listening in our Sunday gatherings? Or are our hearts and minds disengaged, wandering somewhere else? Or like Eli we don't really expect to hear a word from God today. We will not hear unless we pay attention in those specific times when we know God does address people with God's word. Furthermore, do we create spaces in our lives when we are not distracted by ceaseless activity, noise and clamour and anxiety? Is there space in your life, preferably each day when you are quiet, still and attentive to God? If we are not, we should not be surprised that we do not hear God's word addressed to us.

ii The second thing I think we can note from the Scripture this morning is that God still chooses people to be his agents, and to be the ones who embody God's good news. We see that in the call of many women and men in the Scriptures. The call of God to individuals is always an invitation. God always gives us the choice to respond. But we don't always think of ourselves as being worthy of God's call. "Who am I," we say "to be someone who might embody the grace of God, offer another person the mercy of God, or serve them in the name of Christ?" But we can be and we are, when we take seriously God's call to be God's people in our everyday lives.

iii Finally, there is a much darker word from 1 Samuel for us today. I think we can learn from old Eli because I have to admit that I sometimes see myself in Eli. I see the church today in Eli. Dim witted, blind, fallible, with scoundrels for sons and daughters, priests and ministers, leaders and lay people. We didn't need a Royal Commission into sexual abuse in the church to know that. We have always known that, even if we were largely unaware of a particular wickedness in our time. Eli had lost his vision of God's purposes for Israel. He had become a functionary in the Temple, doing his duty, but without conviction or courage. So God's judgment is that Eli and his house will be bypassed. God will find new people who will speak God's judgment and declare God's grace.

We are seeing that today in global Christianity, which many Westerners still believe is centered in Europe and North America, the global north. But Christian Faith is in significant decline there, but is exploding in the global south, which we used to call the Third World. We are moving into a new period in history when the Western church may well be bypassed, and leadership of the church world-wide will pass to Christians in other continents and cultures. The church's growth in the 21st century is most pronounced in Africa, Asia and Latin America. That's where the significant leadership in the world church is coming from.

And one more thing: I have to say something to say about Israel in 2024 when reading this passage. Yes, as a Christian preacher, I have to say this Hebrew Scripture has a particular word for modern Israel. I say, You cannot escape the judgement of Yahweh and Yahweh's justice when you wage war against your neighbours that destroys the lives of men, women and children in the pursuit of your enemies. Yahweh has called you to be alight to the nations. I ask Israel, "Are you listening to Yahweh as you pursue your national interests in this current conflict?"

Conclusion: That is the message from today's Scripture for us today. Not unadulterated jollity is it? But it is a message for real life, our ordinary lives.

But let Eli's words to Samuel be our last word this morning. **"... If he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.'**

Rod Horsfield