

Listening

I Samuel 3:1-10; John 1:43-51

Many of us will remember being told by some teacher or elderly relative, at some time in our childhood, "Remember, you have two ears and one mouth. Use them in that proportion." It's advice I know I struggle with from time to time, especially in these strange days when meetings are done on Zoom and you are never quite sure if the others on your computer screen can hear you, so you speak louder, and for longer as if you were addressing the nation. William Gladstone served Queen Victoria as her Prime Minister four times, but they never really got on. She is reputed to have said about the loquacious politician, "He speaks to me as if I were a public meeting."

Listening and speaking, speaking and listening. The two go together. In this day, and in this age, who is doing the listening? Who needs to be heard? Who is talking too much? Who isn't listening? Our Old Testament lesson from the First Book of Samuel this morning starts with what one commentator describes as, "an arrestingly modern note."¹ *"And the word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision."*

Was the word rare because God did not speak? Was the word rare because no one was listening, though God was still speaking? Was there no vision of God because no one was looking? Had things become so down, so depressed, so stuck in a rut that there was no expectation that God was doing or saying anything to God's people? Religion was still ongoing, there were priests and places to worship, but people were simply going through the motions, and nobody expected very much in any case.

After the tempestuous and chaotic days of the Judges of Israel, those spontaneous, random charismatic leaders, the country had settled into a comfortable political rut. Life was not entirely easy, but people were going about their business, looking to their own concerns, and many had stopped looking, and listening.

Some were waiting. Not in our passage, but just a chapter or two before there was Hannah, praying and waiting and longing for a son. Then at last Samuel. Her child of promise. The first

significant religious leader since Moses. A prophet. He wouldn't grow into the supreme leader of the country, but as a prophet he would listen to what God was saying, and look at what was going on around him in his country, and he would speak out. A prophet is someone who listens, and then speaks, saying some pretty straightforward and often challenging and unpalatable things. Like a mirror held up to the nation, Samuel would show his fellow Israelites what they were like, and say to them, 'This is who you are, this is what you are like. Is this, do you think, what God wants you to be?'

But in our story today, we are just at the beginning of Samuel's life. His mother, grateful for the gift of a son, dedicated him to serve in the holy places of those days. "I have lent him to the Lord." And, in an echo of Jesus, we read that Samuel continued to grow, "both in stature and favour with the Lord and with men." He served God in the holy places before the Temple was built, and he was open to the possibility of God. He needed help, he didn't understand that God was speaking to him at first, but God was still speaking, and Samuel listened.

The story of Samuel is often told as if it were an, "idyllic account of childlike faith"ⁱⁱ, but it is so much more than that. God is going to do a new thing, so large that the world will change, and God is going to do it through a young boy. It *is* a bit like the Christmas story, particularly in Luke's Gospel. Here, it has to do with listening. Radical listening.

I believe this story could speak to many today. Like Samuel, we don't yet know or understand what God is about. Like Samuel, we might have become a bit sleepy in our faith. Over these last months, simply keeping things going in our homes, in our work life, in our relationships, in our Church, has been exhausting. We can be working morning, noon and night, doing and being good things but never really pausing long enough, or awake long enough, to hear what God might be saying to us today. Not just to me, but to you. To all of us. When God calls Samuel, and us, might it be the case that the first thing God wants us to do is to listen? There is a difference between listening and waiting for your turn to speak. Ernest Hemingway once said, "I like to listen. I have learned a great deal from listening carefully. Most people never listen." Two ears, one mouth.

If we are listening out for what God might be saying to us today, then who else might God be prompting us to listen to after we have heard God? When God calls to us, God will be wanting to draw our attention to Him, and to something He wants us to hear, and then see, and then be, and then do. After listening, we are called to understand, and then think, and then act. In our story, what Samuel is instructed by the old priest to say when God calls is, "Speak, Lord, for Thy servant hears." There's a little Jewish humour here, for the name Samuel means, 'God has heard'. God hears us, We must hear God.

What does God want us to hear today? Have you followed up on your promise to give someone a call, made ages ago? So that a loved one, a friend, can hear your voice, but also so that you can hear them, and their stories, and their hurts, and their hopes? What about that work colleague, battling on under great pressure, alone, and needing not only a word of encouragement, but someone to listen to them? What about that person you know who has had bad news, and might need a shoulder to cry on, metaphorically, a listening ear? What about that person in your district from whom you've not heard in a while, who could do with a friendly voice, and that listening ear?

What about those in our community and country today who are going hungry, or homeless? What about those living through the dark days of drug abuse, or alcohol dependency? What about those who know fear in their home because of domestic violence, physical, verbal or emotional? What about children struggling with learning at home, and the parents and carers trying to teach them? What about the people too frail or too frightened to go outside? All those people who even though they are often voiceless, still need to be heard? When we have heard God, is God pointing us to our sisters and brothers around us, and asking us to, 'listen to them', and not just listen. If you can, do something for them?

What about our world? The angry voices, the fearful voices, the hopeful voices in countries like America, (who have an echo in our own country), who have felt ignored, who have behaved badly, who have behaved well, who want to find healing and unity? What about those countries we once heard about where there was war, famine, fear? Have they gone silent? Does no-one cry out there?

The truth is our world where we live remains noisy, people still call out for help, but do we still listen? Have we become deaf.

Which is why this old story about the boy Samuel reaches out to us over the millennia, from the lesser known pages of the Bible, and arrests our attention. Covid has not mantled the earth in silence. The word of the Lord is no longer rare in our days, the vision is frequent. We need to see, and we need to listen.

It applies to us as individual believers, and it applies to us as a community of faith, the Church. God will call us back not only to worship together, in time, but to witness together and to do something about the things we have heard God saying to us in these muffled days. God is going to do a new thing. We may have to be transformed. God is still speaking. Imagine our world and our community transformed: all the good things that we have longed for and prayed for and worked for, brought back to us and still possible beyond the wreckage of lockdown. A world, a country, a community, a Church rebuilt – inspired by a God Who is still speaking, and a people of God who are listening like never before.

May our prayer in the days ahead be as simple as Samuel's: "Speak, Lord, for Thy servant hears." Then having listened, together, with God, with each other, we act, and reach out again to God's aching, waiting, hoping world. Listen! God speaks. Listen! God's hurting people still need to be heard.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Lawrence Wood, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 4 p243

ⁱⁱ Walter Brueggemann, First and Second Samuel, p25