

Hearing

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

In the Church where I first became a communicant member, the wonderfully named Blackadder Church in North Berwick, there was a lovely carving on the old wooden font. On the lid there was a little child, kneeling in prayer, eyes, and ears open. It was generally believed that this was the boy Samuel. For someone who was one of the key prophets and leaders in the Old Testament, and played a significant role in the kingships of Saul and David, and re-establishing a pattern of lived faith for ancient Israel. "Samuel, Samuel..."

Eli was the priest of the shrine at Shiloh. Shiloh is about 19 miles north of Jerusalem and was one of the ancient holy sites where the Ark of the Covenant would be kept, in the time before the Temple at Jerusalem was built. Eli's two sons helped him with his ministry, although mostly they helped themselves to the meat people brought to sacrifice at the shrine. Their corruption infuriated Eli, but he was weak. Like most conflict-averse people, Eli hoped the problem would simply go away. It didn't. Shiloh was emblematic of a world gone very wrong, devoid of the Presence and the Voice. *"The word of the Lord was rare in those days,"* the Bible says, *"...there was no frequent vision."* Why would God show up if nobody was looking? Why would God speak if nobody was listening? "Samuel, Samuel..."

Yet even at Shiloh *"the lamp of God had not yet gone out"* altogether. The Bible says there was still a flicker, still a chance. And that chance had a name: Samuel, Eli's little acolyte. Out of the blue, in the dead of night, God broke the silence to talk to a child who was fast asleep. "Samuel, Samuel..."

Samuel didn't know it was God, and the chance nearly died. But Eli had enough sense left to realize that the Lord was speaking. He taught Samuel the most important words anyone can ever say: *"Speak, Lord, for Thy servant hears."* The next time God spoke to him, Samuel replied, and soon Shiloh became a place where people could find God again. "Samuel, Samuel..."

This ancient story has an arrestingly modern note. Is it the case that God's word is rare in our time, and there are few visions of what people of faith, whether that faith is great or small, should be doing? In a world where people feel they have the right to talk when they don't always have something to say; in a world where there are so many words but nobody is listening; in a world where people who need to be heard cannot make themselves heard over the din of jabbering, or the white noise of indifference, I think there is a stunning contemporary relevance to this pivotal tale about Samuel. What are we supposed to be hearing today? Where are the people who are listening for God speaking, and for the voices of God's children that need to be heard? "Samuel, Samuel..."

Why, for example, after the story had been in the media, and on the agenda of one of Britain's largest institutions, and in the political domain, and amongst the legal world, did it take a television drama about the scandal endured by hundreds of postmasters and mistresses? Bravo to the writers and actors who determined to speak out, and to the journalists and others who brought this shameful scandal once more to the attention of the nation. Is it too cynical to wonder if politicians north and south of the border responded to the public outcry with greater alacrity because of it is an election year? Why does it appear as if no one heard the voices of the victims of this massive miscarriage of justice? Why does it appear that no one was listening to what they had to say when what they were saying was the truth. George Orwell once wrote, "In times of universal deceit, telling the truth will be a revolutionary act." I suspect part of the revolution is not

just the speaking of truth, but the listening to truth, and then doing something about the truth which is not just about compensation, or revenge, or accountability, but about changing an attitude which had tuned truth out, and no longer listened. "Samuel, Samuel..."

It has made me wonder what other issues have we turned deaf ears towards? Or, hearing, choose not to listen? What situations in the world have we developed a deafness towards, because they are too painful, or too complex, or too far away from our experience that we choose not to hear? "Samuel, Samuel..."

Or can we personalise this and bring it up close and personal? Are there people in your life that you do not hear, and do not listen to, because to hear and to listen would mean you would need to respond. Who have we shut out because of our indifference, or hostility, or judgementalism, or snobbery? Who do we choose not to hear because we know they're going to say things that are difficult, or challenging, or say something we know we won't agree with because our views are different, or not because they're wrong, but because they're right, and their being right means we have to change, or do something about what we have listened to from them. "Samuel, Samuel..."

The experience of ancient Israel was to stop listening to God. Not expecting God to have anything to say. Believing God was asleep, or gone away, and certainly no longer speaking. But it wasn't God Who was asleep, it was the people. God's word may have been rare in those days, not because God had stopped speaking, but because God's people had stopped listening, stopped expecting, stopped responding. "Samuel, Samuel..."

Could you say it was the case that here was a people who had chosen comfort over courage. Who had chosen what was fun, or fast, or easy over what was right. Who had chosen to profess their values, but not to practise them? Who still had holy places, but by and large ignored them or bypassed them because they thought they had nothing to say to the situations and realities of

the day. Could you say this might be the case for our country today? When it takes the awkward, or the unlikely, or the apparently powerless outside the establishment to say loudly, clearly, unequivocally what needed to be said, and shamed those in power to doing something about it? The Post Office scandal. The homelessness scandal. The dependency on foodbanks scandal. The fuel poverty scandal. The underpayment of medical and care staff scandal. The environmental and ecological scandal. The poor resourcing of schools scandal. The victims of crime scandal. The refugees scandal. The rising cost of formula milk scandal. The abuse of children in schools and children's homes scandal. The murders in southern Israel and the destruction of Gaza scandal.

"Samuel, Samuel..."

Why God chose a sleepy child we'll never know. Are children more open to hearing, to listening, than adults whose lives are crowded with care, and work, and responsibility, and busy-ness? There is no accounting for God's choices. There is only the accounting we'll have to make if God calls us and we don't answer, or if God calls others and they don't answer because no one taught them how to hear and how to listen. Or if we let the lamp of faith go out when there's still a flicker, a slim chance that has our name written all over it, if only we would wake up, open our ears, hear God's voice, and listen.

"Samuel, Samuel..."

In John's Gospel, and all the others, the call to be a disciple is direct. "Follow Me", says Jesus. Everyone heard, but not everyone listened, and certainly not everyone did what He invited them to do.

I believe God is still speaking. At the very least that requires us to hear, and to listen. And perhaps we, like Samuel, need to respond, and do something about what God is saying to us, and our generation, today. To attend to our relationships. To look out for the needs of our community. To

see what we might do in our Church. To think how we might do something that will help our country, or our world, and its environment.

Sometimes when we walk into a room of friends they will say, "Oh your ears must be burning, we were just talking about you!" I wonder if that's what woke the boy Samuel up, his ears burning, because God was talking about him. Because God was talking to him. When that happens to you, what do you think God might want to say to you? And as important, how will you reply?

"Speak, Lord, for Thy servant hears."

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

Amen