

Listening for God, Listening to God

We heard in our reading from 1 Samuel that “*The boy Samuel ministered before the Lord under Eli. In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions.*” (3:1).

The word of the Lord was rare. Or more simply, as the Good News Translation puts it: In those days...there were very few messages from the Lord .

It's clear that God was still speaking, still seeking communication with the people, but the people weren't listening. They might have heard *something*, but they weren't taking much notice if they did.

Sometimes when we are talking to small children, especially when we are telling them to do something they don't want to do – or stop doing something they want to do - they put their hands over their ears, because they just don't want to listen. They know they are being spoken to, but they do not want to hear. <I can't hear you>

And there is an element of that in the situation at the time of Samuel. The people were happy enough - they were confident that they were God's chosen people, and they liked the feeling that God was there if they needed him, but they didn't want to hear what God had to say to them day to day. They probably felt that if they were doing anything wrong, it was only minor things, and not worth worrying about. They wanted to continue as they were, because it was pretty good for them.

You get a sense of this if you look at the first two chapters of 1 Samuel, when you can see that Eli's sons, who were also priests, didn't honour God at all – see 2:12 “*Eli's sons were scoundrels; they had no regard for the Lord.*”. They treated the offerings with contempt, took advantage of their positions and they were sexually promiscuous. If anyone was going to say “I can't hear you” to God – it was them. They didn't want to hear what God was saying to them.

But as well as this, as well as people not listening to God, not being prepared to hear what God had to say, we heard that God was speaking to them much less.

Which is a challenge for us to come to grips with, but I think also makes sense. The people had a covenant relationship with God. And relationships depend upon communication.

So, when we read “*In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions.*” in verse one, we can know that things were bad in their relationship with God. If you heard of a married couple who hardly spoke anymore, you'd know things were dire for the couple, wouldn't you?

It's difficult for God to communicate when his people don't want to hear. It'd no surprise that the relationship with God had broken down, and the word of God to his people was rare.

But in today's reading, we see the communication being re-established. And through a boy.

Samuel was young, and he was effectively a trainee priest under Eli. And while Samuel was young, Eli was getting on a bit.

One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place. The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the house of the Lord, where the ark of God was. (3:2-3)

It was early evening, the lamp was still burning, Eli was in his room, and Samuel getting ready to sleep in the temple. I don't know how comfortable it would have been to sleep in the temple – but I'm guessing not very. And I'm not sure if Samuel sleeping in the temple shows Samuel's dedication, or Eli's miserliness, or disregard for his comfort. Or possibly a bit of both.

Then the Lord called Samuel. Samuel answered, "Here I am." And he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

But Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down." So he went and lay down. (3:4-5)

Samuel didn't realise it whose the voice was, and neither did Eli.

And so again the Lord called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." (3:6)

Now, you could be forgiven for thinking that this story is a little bit like 'The boy who cried wolf', and that Samuel repeatedly disturbing his master (who makes him sleep in the temple) is going to ultimately have a bad outcome for the boy.

But it doesn't. And in verse 7, we get a bit more detail of Samuel: *Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord: The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.* While Samuel was an apprentice to Eli (for want of a better term), he wasn't a prophet. He couldn't speak the word of the Lord – which is the job of a prophet – because he didn't yet know the Lord. But as we read "the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him" – we know that it will be.

And so: A third time the Lord called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." (3:8)

And now Eli twigged: Then Eli realised that it was God who was calling the boy. *Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Then Eli realized that the Lord was calling the boy. So Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. (3:9)*

Eli was a priest, he knew such things could happen. And he told Samuel the appropriate response: When God calls, don't block your ears, don't run away. But listen. Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.

And then we read in verse 10, The Lord came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

Now what do we, as 21st century Christians take from this story? Do we expect God to be speaking to us today? And if God is speaking to us, are we listening? For that matter, do we really want to hear what God is saying to us?

We're pretty well off, mostly, these days. Pretty comfortable. We might worry a bit about some things, but really what can we do? As a church as long as we've got enough offertory to pay the bills, and enough people to fill all the roster slots, it's okay, isn't it?

We can get very comfortable. We get comfortable with the regularity and the ritual. It's easy to get comfortable with the familiar words, and we don't really listen to them. Responses are automatic. "The Lord be with you" – "And also with you", "Your sins are forgiven" – "thanks be to God", "Our father in heaven" – "Hallowed be your name". We hear them, but do we really listen? Do we understand what they mean? The Lord IS really with us. Our sins ARE really forgiven. We get to claim the creator of all things as OUR father. If we stop to think about them, those are amazing things. But do we stop to think about them?

And as well as becoming complacent with those things, it's easy to start covering our ears and saying "I can't hear you" to things we don't like.

If we're honest with ourselves, it's sometimes uncomfortable when God wants to speak to us. We like to stick the familiar words and rituals that give comfort, but we are a covenant people just like the national of Israel was: We have inherited the new covenant that God has put in place through Jesus – Jesus who died for us. We can have a relationship with God. But that depends on communication. A relationship that is a two-sided conversation. And if we're not talking to God, and not listening for God and listening to God, then our relationship will be in trouble.

But no matter how many times we might block our ears and say "I can't hear you" to God, God will never say the same thing to us. God has reached out to us once and for all in Jesus, in sending his Son to save us. Despite people that by and large did not want to hear God, God did not let go. God didn't walk away from his people. God didn't stop trying to communicate.

It isn't always easy to hear God's call. God's call to Samuel had to be repeated. He heard God's call but didn't quite understand it. But he did hear. He was really listening. He was able to continue the conversation. He was able to make it a two sided communication by responding to God – 'speak, for your servant is listening'. For all his physical and spiritual immaturity, Samuel was receptive to God and open to the idea that God might want to speak to him.

How receptive are we to God's word today? I wonder how much we really expect God to speak to us. Sometimes we are so grown-up about things that we dismiss the idea that God could really be speaking to us. But we need to be like young Samuel.

Later on, in the verses after the section we had for our Bible reading, we see that: *The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the Lord. The Lord continued to appear at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word. (3:19-21)*

Samuel's listening to the Lord had an effect: It had an effect for him, and it had an effect for the nation:

The first thing we see is that Samuel grew up. Not only physically, but spiritually; He grew in the knowledge and love of God. He grew in his relationship with God. Samuel became a prophet and was able to give God's word to the people. Samuel's relationship with God grew as a result of his receptiveness to God and his word.

And Samuel's receptiveness to God also had an effect on the nation. As his ministry developed, the people recognised Samuel as God's prophet. The Lord appeared regularly to Samuel. No longer was the word of God a rarity in the nation. No longer was the word of God ignored. But at last, hearing the word of God – and listening to it – was a regular occurrence, and the word of God was once again central to the life of the nation. And the relationship between God and his people was restored.

And so it is with us: if we are receptive to God and his word, there is a result. There is a result in our own lives because as we truly listen and truly respond to God, we grow. We grow in our relationship with God. We develop spiritually. We become more like Jesus. And our spiritual gifts are developed.

We need to build our own relationship with God. We need to pray – and we need to listen. We need to open the scriptures – and meditate on them. We need to meet together – and talk to and listen to each other.

We live in a world which is in desperate need of God. We live in a world which needs a relationship with God. A world that so often blocks its ears and says "I can't hear you" to God. The world needs God, and God has reached out to the world in Jesus - who calls all people to a relationship with him. So as God's people here, we need to be receptive to his word, and to share that word with the whole world.

Amen.