

## ‘Speak Lord for your servant is listening’

Sermon for Evensong St James Lower Hutt May 12<sup>th</sup> 2019 by the Rev Derek Lightbourne

Keynote Bible passages: 1 Samuel 3.1 – 20, Luke 2. 41 – 52

The writer describes the context well: ‘The word of the Lord was rare in those days, visions were not widespread.’ (1 Sam 3.1). Tonight, we continue consideration of the first book of Samuel. It is a turbulent time. In this occurs a delightfully moving story of a young boy who would be in the destiny of God.

We will first consider the context of the story, then the incident where young Samuel hears a voice, and then its theological context – what could be the application for our faith?

1) *Historical context.* The Hebrew people had escaped Egypt in the Exodus and after 40 years in the wilderness arrived in the Promised Land. Or so they thought. Foreign tribes were occupying the territory, most notably the warlike Philistines. All this was occurring round 1000 BC. For the Hebrews it was the time of the Judges, before they had kings to rule. Notable names of the time included Joshua and Samson. Because they had been in transit there was no capital and the Ark of the Covenant (of the Law of Moses) was a treasured and very holy item. Eventually Shiloh became the capital, some 200 years before Jerusalem. And that’s where the story picks up with Hannah in silent prayer pleading to God for a child and heir in the family. God hears and answers, and Hannah utters praises in words that are echoed in the Magnificat: ‘My heart exults in the Lord, my strength is exulted in my God’, thus praising the wonder of God’s character. And so, Samuel is born. In the course of this we are introduced to Eli, the elderly priest of the Temple. But Eli’s sons were ‘scoundrels’ (NRSV) and had no regard for the Lord. Enter the boy Samuel. We’ll come to that in a moment.

Things aren’t going to get much better. The Philistines wage war against the Hebrews, invade and destroy Shiloh and capture the Ark. The saga continues and eventually becomes positive with the siting of the Hebrew capital being Jerusalem and deciding on rule by kings, first with Saul and then David. Through this Samuel becomes first a judge and then prophet and leads the people back to God. Thus, the writer testifies, ‘As Samuel grew up the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground.’ (1 Sam 3.19).

Second, tonight’s story *Samuel’s visions in the temple.* The writer describes it: ‘Samuel grew up in the presence of the Lord, spending time in the Temple under the guidance of the old priest Eli. (‘Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli’.) Then a summary: ‘the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favour with the Lord and with the people. (Sounds familiar in the description of the boy Jesus, in tonight’s second reading). The custom apparently was for the boy to sleep in the tabernacle near the Ark, and Eli was in an adjoining room. It was near morning as the candle was burning low and a voice called. Samuel goes to Eli but it was not him calling, Three times. Eli was wise – instructing young Samuel to listen to the voice he was no longer hearing. ‘Here I am, for you called me.’ Not once, twice but a third time. By then Eli was sure who it was and advises Samuel to say: ‘Speak Lord for your servant is listening.’ God had a message through Samuel for Eli. Not good news. God was displeased with the behaviour of Eli’s sons, and it was a message of judgment for Eli and his family. And so, it was, a messenger brought news to Eli that the Hebrews had lost the battle. Eli was so shocked he fell

backwards... 'his neck was broken, and he died, for he was an old man, and heavy.' (1 Sam 4.19)

3) '*Speak Lord for your servant is listening*'. What's the significance of these words for us? How often, for example do we hear the Lord speaking, and what do we do about it? It can be difficult to answer this as in my experience we accept that people are praying when on their own but rarely do we know the content or the nature of the prayer. Corporate prayer we know, but do we listen to what God might be saying when we pray in personal prayer?

Thus, the question is addressed and it's for each to answer that – us in the presence of God, in church, in creation, or in one's own home. My own concern is to '*keep prayer fresh*'. So variously I use different ways – from the Internet, from the writings of well-known pray-er people like Henri Nouwen's meditations. When away I have a book of prayers by Stephanie Dowrick a Presbyterian minister in Sydney in a book '*Heaven on earth – Timeless prayers of wisdom and love*.' Then there's meditative prayers related to preparing the sermon of Sunday, and getting divine inspiration. Hence the ascription to begin the sermon, 'in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and what is said being in God's leading and purpose. Then there's the outdoors prayers, mostly wordless but full of awe in the beauty of creation. And more recently a friend put together a book of prayers he's crafted, and each day I turn it to use these as the thoughts for the day. Bruce Gilbert called it '*Two Prayers for Today*.' What happens from the praying is really important and a part we may miss. In praying or reading scriptures the words or phrases or sentences come alive!' That's a significant way I believe I hear God speaking. So, my prayers are not ordered as such – but they do include adoration, praise, some confession, intercession and silent meditation '*simply being still*' (for the presence of the Lord.....).

Some get responses in pictures, seeing the way ahead. We might hesitate to call them visions in the biblical sense, yet in my ministry I certainly have met folk who get visual messages. What I've learned is to trust the way(s) you believe you get messages from God. Remember that introduction in the letter to the Hebrews '*In many and various ways God spoke...*'

In this praying can I strongly suggest there's a *listening* component – that's what Eli's words to Samuel were about. *Balancing* the intercessory part with the listening allows God to give us wisdom, inspiration, encouragement. So very important. It may be from this time God has words for us and for another, and outcome of the intercessory time. Thus, to let God be pro-active.

There's lots more that could be shared on listening prayer. It may be for some you have a prayer partner, or friend in the Lord with whom you can share. Some find it helpful to have a prayer companion offering spiritual direction. What that is not is being told how to pray but rather direction in growing in prayer and learning to pray ever more deeply. Sometimes there may seem 'blocks in getting through to God, or God to us. May I suggest go to a 'default' position back to basics and use a resource like the NZ Prayer Book offering daily devotions, or work through the Psalms or the scriptures offered in the weekly Newslink.

*Concluding* then, the Old Testament can seem daunting at times yet in it are treasures of wisdom and guidance for Christian living and for prayer. Tonight, has been one such. Do take time, make time for that being in prayer. Then we will more likely hear what God has for us. and it won't be when 'the word of the Lord is rare, visions not being widespread.'

