



I Sam 3.1-10 p.227
John 1.43-51 p.79
14th January 2024

Love bade me welcome...

Introduction to The Theme

It's a bit of a churchy phrase, to talk of someone being 'called'.

We often use it when talking about ministers.

My college principal hated the responsibility he and his colleagues had in deciding whether or not to accept a candidate for training. His big fear was the process may misjudge a person's sense of call, accepting those for training who actually didn't have either the gifts or personality to see it through, whilst rejecting those who did. Of course, he didn't have to make that decision alone, the strength of the process was that so many were involved in along the way.

Of course, in the Bible being called didn't always come with an option. David was chosen to be the next king without a discussion, and eventually Saul, who became Paul, accepted his call after a visionary experience that seemed to unambiguously seal the deal.

I suspect this idea of Call can be confusing or even discouraging for some. Am I really called? Or maybe we feel a little sidelined by this language because this just isn't my experience.

Today's readings from the scriptures speak of responding to God's call, and we're going to concentrate on the Jewish story this morning.

George Herbert was a young priest, he only lived till he was 39, who ministered on the outskirts of Salisbury. One of his most famous poems begins: *Love bade me welcome, yet my soul drew back.*

These are beautiful words and have been set to music many times. I love the idea that it is, essentially, the love of God that is calling us. Constantly drawing us on, beckoning us to follow. We may draw back yet love still calls and makes us welcome.

My ordination had a sense of call about it. I think your baptism did too. And I know that everyone received into membership last week did so because there is something that draws us to one another and to God, the Love that bade us welcome.

So, in a few moments we'll look at this theme of calling through the story of Samuel, living at a holy shrine called Shilo, apprenticed to and mentored by a wise servant of God called Eli.

The Sermon

What did your parents want you to become?

For some youngsters the expectations of mum and dad can at times seem overwhelming. And in the end none of us can dictate our children's future. Ultimately it has to be their decision. My parents were rather surprised when I announced one evening I wanted to become a minister. My two brothers are still getting over the shock!

In the story of Samuel from the Old Testament we have a mother who desperately wants her son to be a servant of God. Hannah longed and prayed for a child, and when he was born she dedicated his life to God.

Our lectionary reading from the Jewish scriptures this morning has elements of a Confirmation Service about it. Hannah's dedication of her son to God is deeply moving and she does everything in her power to put Samuel in the flow of God's love. Yet, at some point, Hannah's faith cannot be enough in Samuel's pilgrimage. So, in today's story Samuel names and owns a faith that is his own. In a way he 'comes of age' and grows into that relationship with God that his mother so longed and prayed for.

Yet, as this story begins it doesn't look too hopeful because for years there had been silence at Shilo.

Shiloh was the shrine, the sacred place where Eli and Samuel lived. It was a holy place in Israel because it housed the Ark of the Covenant which the people saw as the living presence of God amongst them.

If God was going to speak anywhere you would expect it be to at Shiloh. This place had the atmosphere of Canterbury, Rome or the holiest place you could ever think of all rolled into one!

Yet God was silent at Shiloh and had been for many years.

Of course, you might be forgiven for thinking that Yahweh was always speaking in the Old Testament. But that's simply not the case and in the days of Eli and his apprentice priest, Samuel, at Shiloh the silence seemed deafening.

Here's what it says: *The boy Samuel ministered before the Lord under Eli. In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions.*

Imagine the scene as every night Samuel bedded down at Shiloh and slept in front of the Ark of the Covenant. He lived and dreamed the spiritual life his mother had always wanted. But even he had not heard the voice of God. All of that changed the night of chapter 3 as in the small hours God calls out his name. He has to do it three times because Samuel mistakes God's voice for Eli's.

There is, I suspect, a silence from heaven which at times rocks our faith. We pray for someone we love to be made whole, yet their illness progresses. We experience loss and find the void at times unbearable. We look at the world's problems and ask 'why'? And in all this it may feel as if God is silent.

Mother Theresa walked that road. She never gave up praying – yet again and again she felt a certain silence. She lived with that silence and maybe she grew to understand it – it was only after her death that we realised it had had such significance in her spiritual journey, and perhaps one of the greatest gifts she gave us are those honest entries in her journals that we only knew about once she died.

Now, in today's Jewish narrative, this silence was followed by talking, talking to Eli.

This is, I think something of a touching moment in the story.

There in the middle of the night Samuel runs to Eli's room. It happens twice. By the third time the penny drops with Eli, if not with Samuel. The narrative puts it like this: *then Eli realised 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.*

We used to sing a hymn in the church of my youth – from the old green Baptist Hymn Book based on this story, its first line ran: *Master speak, your servants listening.* It was a common hymn before the sermon I seem to remember!

In the story Eli is a somewhat broken man. His sons, have rather wonderful names: Hophni and Phineas; yet they do not seem to play a wonderful role in the unravelling of this tale. They, it appears, have abandoned the faith of their father. Eli's time at the shrine seems to be drawing to a close and on one level maybe his has not come across as one of the most successful ministries at Shiloh. Yet, this father figure to Samuel, shows no sign of jealousy that God speaks to the younger rather than older priest. In fact, he seems to relish this shared moment with his adopted charge.

The reality is that Samuel benefitted so much from Eli's counsel and encouragement. By himself he got the signs wrong, but with Eli's help God seems to get through.

I believe that the rather obvious, yet important, lesson from this part of today's reading from the Jewish scriptures is that so often we hear God as we talk with each other.

Of course, we can hear God in all sorts of ways. Sometimes that will be by ourselves. Yet, I suspect I'm not alone when I say it's easy to get mixed messages. I've never had a vision or a 'Thus saith the Lord' moment. Yet I've had countless conversations with family and friends when the light has dawned, or the mist parted.

It's the essence of our prayers for Elders or Church Meetings. That as we come together, as we prayerfully talk an issue through, that God will speak to us through the 'other'.

After that evening when I poked my head above the newspaper and just casually mentioned to my folks that I was thinking of leaving the bank and training for the ministry I had to go through lots of committees. I counted them up as I prepared this sermon and I seem to remember ten occasions when I was interviewed between submitting myself for training and being ordained. Ten occasions to talk it through.

I'm not complaining (well, perhaps I did a bit at the time!) because it was a good process. And I suspect you'll have been part of similar ones so that as you've pondered a decision, after all the praying and thinking the light often breaks as you converse with a friend.

For Samuel, part of the process in discerning the will of God for his life, was talking to the old priest Eli.

Perhaps it comes across as a truism, but it's good to talk!

Now finally this morning after the silence at Shiloh and talking to Eli there came the Listening to God.

It had been quite a busy night at the shrine with all these trips along the corridor to Eli's bedroom. But now it was time to settle down, stop struggling so much, to be still and listen.

I remember once chatting to a congregational member, a lady in her 90's and she brought up the subject of prayer. She told me she was still learning – (which I thought was brilliant!) and that these days, how did she put it, she did more listening than talking in her prayers. Actually, what she said to me was: *Now I do more listening than just bringing to God a long list of things I want.*

In our narrative this morning Samuel sensed God speaking to him and he listened. He listened as God called him. He listened as God showed him a different future for Eli's family with the devastating revelation that the priest's sons, Hophni and Phineas were about to be by-passed. He listened as God called him to be not the next priest at the shrine but the next prophet to the nation.

So, this is how this part of the story ends in verse 19: *The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognised 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.*

I wonder what God is saying to us when we come to worship. In our baptism: *You are my beloved.* At communion: *This is what self-giving love looks like.* In our prayers of confession: *you are forgiven and welcomed back.* In our intercessions: *those you mention before me will receive my peace and wholeness.* At the blessing: *go out this week, and I will be with you every step of the way.*

This morning we have eavesdropped on the nighttime conversations at Shiloh. We have acknowledged the sound of silence in our faith, the guidance that comes our way when we simply talk to each other and the words of loving reassurance and inspiring commissioning that come to us in our prayers and liturgy.

And maybe, like Samuel, we have realised once again that a mark of our discipleship is to be ready to pray: *Speak Lord, your servant is listening.*

May it be so, in the name of God, who calls us to a journey and then shares the pathway with us. Amen.

Ian Green, Amersham, 12th January 2023