

1 Samuel 3:1-10, 19-20

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.

At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was. Then the LORD called, 'Samuel! Samuel!' and he said, 'Here I am!' and ran to Eli, and said, 'Here I am, for you called me.' But he said, 'I did not call; lie down again.' So he went and lay down. The LORD called again, 'Samuel!' Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, 'Here I am, for you called me.' But he said, 'I did not call, my son; lie down again.' Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. The LORD called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, 'Here I am, for you called me.' Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, 'Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening."' So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, 'Samuel! Samuel!' And Samuel said, 'Speak, for your servant is listening.'

As Samuel grew up, the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the LORD.

John 1:35-37, 40-47

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!' The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.

One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah' (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, 'You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas' (which is translated Peter).

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.' Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.' Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.' When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!'

When I was a child attending Sunday school, one of my favourite stories was the one about the boy, Samuel. I think in the collection of Bible stories that we were using, this one must have been illustrated, because I have a clear picture in my mind of Samuel lying on a pallet, near to the altar, with a lamp hanging before it. I suppose it was partly the repetition that I found attractive, as three times God calls Samuel, and three times he goes running in to Eli. And partly it would be the fact that Samuel made the same mistake time and time again, each time thinking it was Eli who was calling him. And the third reason why I found it so fascinating was the fact that God was calling to a small boy, not to the priest; to the apprentice, rather than to his master – someone, in fact, about the same age as I was. It is essentially a story that would catch the imagination of a child – a mysterious voice calling out of the darkness – but with a lamp burning, to ensure that it was not frightening.

Bible stories, particularly in the Old Testament, which involve children, are those which are dear to the hearts of Sunday school teachers world-wide. For children relate to children. But there is much more in this story than first meets the eye. I wonder how many of you registered that apparently 'throw away remark' at the beginning of our first reading:

And the word of the Lord was rare in those days; remarks the writer visions were not widespread.

And this puts the story of Samuel into its setting. The society in which the priest Eli serves at the once-famous shrine at Shiloh is one that does not automatically expect the presence of God.

Let me take you back a few years to the time when Samuel's mother, Hannah, comes to the shrine to pray. A barren woman, she is desperate for a child, and in her prayers she promises that, should she be granted the gift of a boy child, she will present him to God. Eli observes her, and does not immediately recognize the intensity of her expression as prayer. On the contrary, he assumes that Hannah is drunk! This suggests that Eli's general experience has been one where:

The word of the Lord was rare in those days.

Apparently Eli has not been used to people coming in off the street to fall on their knees before the Lord. He has come to expect that the shrine will be used as a shelter from the sun, or a place to sleep off a good party. He does not expect people to turn to the shrine to seek the word of the Lord.

But things are changing for Eli. When Hannah's son is born, she keeps her promise and brings him to Eli, that he might serve in the Temple; year by year she visits the shrine, bringing a robe for her son, who ministers before the altar. And it is while he is sleeping in the Temple that Samuel hears his name being called. It is not to the old priest that God calls, but to the child. Just as, centuries later, the angel Gabriel also appears to a young girl who is little more than a child, with his incredible news.

Eli does not choose to return with the boy, instead, he sends Samuel back, alone, while he goes back to sleep. And it is a child who receives God's message, to pass on to the old man. After many years of silence, the word of the Lord is heard once more, by a young, untried boy.

Centuries pass, and then a new voice is heard, that of a young man whose birth had also been miraculous; one whose mother, like

Hannah, longed for a child of her own. Out of the desert he comes striding:

Prepare ye the way of the Lord, he proclaims. In the desert make a highway for our God.

Once again, the voice of the Lord had been silent – until now. Following hard on the heels of John comes another young man, choosing men to serve as his disciples.

Follow me, he says, first to Andrew and to Peter, and then to Philip. And Philip seeks out his friend, Nathaniel, who obviously considers himself something of a man of the world, too sophisticated to be taken in by an itinerant preacher. He mocks Philip, teasing him for his enthusiasm about this *Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth*.

Can there anything good come out of Nazareth? He taunts.

But not for long. Unlike Eli, who went back to sleep and allowed Samuel to go back alone to hear what the Lord had to say to him, Nathaniel responds to Philip's invitation to:

Come and see.

And in doing so, his life is changed for ever.

The voice of the Lord comes to us in different ways, subtly, through everyday events, through our reading and listening, through our quiet reflection and our prayers. If we are alert, if we are tuned in, then we will recognize it when it comes. And we are bound to respond – either by pulling the blankets over our heads and waiting for it to go away, or by saying, as the boy Samuel did:

Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.

Let us pray:

Loving Lord, you know us
and yet call us, imperfect though we are,
to be your light in this world,

to bring wholeness and release,
heal the sick, support the weak.
You know us, and yet call us
to be vessels of your grace.
That you should trust us with this mission
is too difficult to grasp,
and the task, in our strength
is impossible.
You know us and call us.
Use us, Lord we pray,
and by your Spirit
empower us.
Amen.

[Thelma Shacklady]