
Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!"
And Samuel said, "Speak, for Your servant is listening." 1 Samuel 3:10

A story is told that back in the times of telegraph a company put out advertisements for Morse Code operators. Answering the ads, various persons came and filled out the application forms and were told to wait until they were summoned to enter the inner office. All through this time the clatter of Morse could be heard in the background. Many people waited in the office. A young man later came in, filled out the forms, and upon filling it out, immediately entered the inner office without anyone voice saying to him, "Go in". Within a few minutes the young man was escorted out of the office and the employer said, 'Young man, you've got the job.'

The other applicants began grumbling to each other, and one spoke up saying, "That's not fair. He was the last to come in, and we never even got a chance to be interviewed." The employer said, "I'm sorry, but all the time you've been sitting here, the telegraph has been ticking out the following message in Morse Code: 'If you understand this message, then come right in. The job is yours.' None of you heard it or understood it. This young man did. The job is his."

There are many people today who claim they know what God has to say for them in their lives, or who even claim to have had a direct revelation from God, but are they really listening to God, and the one true God who has revealed Himself to us in Christ Jesus, and revealed Himself in the written word? How many times have you heard someone say, "God told me...." and you wondered if whatever they said really did come from God? Indeed, could this sometimes be used as an excuse for some action, or a way of not wanting to confront a reality that we ought to face? How do we 'listen' to God (like hearing the noise of the Morse Code tapping in the background in the room)? And how do we understand and follow what is said?

The story of Samuel is a well-known story. It is a story of someone who 'hears' God. But as we reflect on this important moment in human history (after all, Samuel is the person who ends up anointing the first Kings of Israel – Saul and David), it is helpful to know something of the background of what is happening here (see 1 Samuel 2:12-36). At the background of this story stands another man, Eli, whose eyesight is weak, and whose sons are wicked. We are even told that they had violated the very sanctuary of God by having sex with the women attendants of the sanctuary. But not only Eli's sons are condemned. At the beginning of First Samuel we are told 'the word of God was rare in those days'. This reflects the situation at the end of the Book of Judges where 'everyone did as they saw fit'. Therefore, Eli and his sons

represents Israel and her people who had taken a path in allowing the things of God to grow dim in their ears and eyes. Their paths of life had led to a spiritual blindness and a deafness to the voice and word of God.

Yet there is hope here for us in this story. We are also told in verse 3 that “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.” The lamp of God and the ark both symbolised the presence of God in the sanctuary. In this story they represent the presence of God in the darkness into which Israel’s spiritual blindness has led them. In the midst of the darkness of failing light that has descended over Israel, the flame of God’s presence is still burning. God had not abandoned His people. And if there is anything that we need to hear today, it is that the flame of God’s presence among his people has not gone out! The flame of His presence will never go out for you...!

There are two important Hebrew words in our story this day. One is *shema* which means ‘to hear, and the other is *dabar* which means ‘word’. The name Samuel is a play on the word ‘to hear’. When Hannah (Samuel’s mother) went into the Shiloh sanctuary to pray to have a child, her prayers were answered, and she named the child ‘Samuel’, which means ‘heard of God’. Later, Samuel ‘hears’ God.

Now it is important to recognise that this sort of ‘hearing’ by ‘Samuel’ is not any sort of ‘hearing’, but pertains to the very ‘word’ (*dabar*) of God. It is by that ‘word’ that God created the whole world and the universe. It is by that ‘word’ that God judges people, and when He says something will be, it will come to pass. That is why many Old Testament kings tried to get rid of the prophets. They somehow wrongly thought if they could get rid of the prophet (as Ahab and other kings complained when Elijah, and other prophets appeared before them) then maybe they could get rid of God’s word of judgement. But God’s Word stands firm.

Now the Good News for us is that the Bible says, “And this Word has become flesh in Jesus” (John 1:14). God has come to you with His grace and love in Jesus. And God has ‘revealed’ this ‘Word’ to us in the very written word of God, the Bible.

That means we do not need to have to go ‘looking within’ ourselves’ to hear the very ‘Word of God’. It is here before you, and you have access to that word in you very own homes and hearts, whenever you bother to open up the Bible and read, and meditate on it, and take it in.

There is so much ‘false spirituality;’ around that will leave you guessing, or dissatisfied that somehow your own ‘spiritual life’ is incomplete or not as good as some. Don’t listen to it. What you need for a healthy spirituality. And to clearly ‘hear the word of God’ today is simply and clearly enunciated for you in the Catechism. Morning and Evening prayer, prayer at mealtime, worship together with the baptised people of God, and the reading and meditation of

Scripture in family devotion will bring you much nearer to God than we may often want to realise. You too can be (and are) like Samuel. Be comforted in that 'word' today.

Anyone who's read the Old Testament knows that God frequently spoke directly to his people. He talked with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3); he personally warned Noah of the flood that was coming and provided instructions to build an ark (Genesis 6); he spoke to Abraham on multiple occasions, calling him out of idolatry and sending him to a new land (Genesis 12), testing his faith (Genesis 22), confirming his covenant (Genesis 15); and he called Moses to lead Israel from a burning bush (Exodus 3); and here, in the account before us, the Lord not only spoke but even stood before Samuel in the middle of the night. And the natural question that many people ask is: why doesn't God do that anymore today? Does God have laryngitis? Are we doing something wrong?

If we believe that "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son" (Hebrews 1:1-2), we know that God is speaking. The question is: are we listening?

A story is once told of an American Indian walking in New York who suddenly stops and tells a friend that he could hear a cricket. The friend said it was impossible to hear a cricket in all the noise of people and traffic. But his friend calmly went to a planter box nearby and pointed to the cricket. His friend replied, 'You must have super-human ears'. The American Indian replied, 'My ears are no different than yours'. He then took two coins from his pocket and discreetly dropped them on the pavement. Suddenly many ears in the crowd turned their way. He continued, 'It all depends on what you are listening for.'

In our Gospel this day we hear that Jesus came to Philip and Nathanael and said, "Follow Me". And they did. But before we start romanticising their response (and even the response of Samuel) we also need to remember again the power of God's Word that calls. With the Word God created this world and the whole universe. With His Word Jesus calmed the storm. With the Word he raised the dead and healed the sick. And with His Word Jesus says, "Your sins are forgiven... This is My body... This is My blood... Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them and teaching them... And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age...."

God has called each of you by name in your baptism, just as He had called Samuel. And today we hear God's Word through the proclamation of the Word of Jesus. Jesus comes to us in the forgiveness we receive when we confess our sins. Jesus comes to us when we hear and study His Word. Jesus comes to us where He has promised to speak to with us – in, with, under bread and wine. God is with us, and He speaks His Word of grace and love and forgiveness in real and powerful ways. The question is, are we listening to

Him...? Are you listening to Him? What is your response when you hear this question...?

In all this, the Good News is that God, in His grace, continues to speak. He hasn't taken His Word from our homes, from our church, from our country – in fact, just the opposite, He speaks to us in more places and ways than ever before. God is infinitely more patient with our deafness than we are with one another. Have you ever felt the burden of your sin, the guilt of your disobedience and not found your Saviour standing here, offering you His body and blood, telling you to go in peace, your sins are forgiven? Have you ever desired guidance or peace or comfort and not had access to a Bible?

For Jesus' sake, God still speaks to us. He speaks to us day after day, year after year, so that even stubborn, selective listeners like us get the message. And when He speaks, He gets results. We see that in the case of Samuel. The fourth time the LORD called to Samuel, he finally listened. And he kept listening even though the message God had for him was unpleasant, and even though what God was calling him to do wasn't easy. God was calling Samuel to announce His judgment and punishment on his mentor and friend, Eli, and his sons for their deafness and disobedience (1 Samuel 3:11-18). Without question, it would have been easier for Samuel to just roll over and stay in bed. Humanly speaking, it might have seemed prudent for Samuel to change or modify God's message to avoid offending and angering Eli. But through His Word God gave Samuel faith to not only listen but to boldly obey.

In the account from First Samuel, Samuel says to the Lord, "Speak, for Your servant hears." Samuel urges God to speak and God does because He has something for Samuel to hear. So also, we listen because He has something He wants us to hear. We hear His voice because He speaks His saving truth into our lives – the saving truth of Jesus. And as we reflect on the Holy Gospel this day (John 1:43-51 – as Jesus *speaks* to Philip and Nathanael), let us praise God that even in those times when we have doubts about our own faith, Jesus' promise is to speak to us constantly with His grace and love through His holy Word.

God continues to do that for us, too. He gives us the wisdom to understand that in a noisy world, there's only one voice we really need to hear (Luke 10:42). He gives us the gift of the Spirit, so that we not only hear His Word, but believe it (Romans 10:17). He guides our lives with his Word like a light shining on our path (Psalm 119:105). And, like with Samuel, He transforms people like us. Remember that simple word from God to you, "I have called you by name. You are mine." What a wonderful thing it is to know God speaks this word over us that we may receive the gift of forgiveness and eternal life. Amen.