**15th January 2012**

**1 Samuel 3:1-10 (11-20) John 1.43-51**

This is the season of epiphany – the time of seeing in a new light, the time of God revealing his light to all the nations. I had an epiphany the other day. I was trying to do something on the computer and I hadn’t got a clue.so I asked my daughter – who knew instantly what I had to do. It was an epiphany. I have got to that age when if I have a problem with the computer or the mobile phone I am turning to the younger members of the family to help me out!

Our bible readings today speak about the need for each other, the call of God and the need to see and hear in different ways.

As you may know I’m currently doing a master’s degree in Christian spirituality so I’ll include some pithy sayings on spirituality today!

**St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153)**
**If you wish to see: listen. Hearing is a step towards vision.**

**Quote: Soren Kierkegaard Christina philosopher of the 19th century**
**To pray does not mean to listen to oneself speaking. Prayer involves becoming silent, and being silent, and waiting until God is heard.**

Samuel’s call offers many pointers to how God may be speaking to us today and revealing himself.

**First of all God speaks to all people and that includes children**. God speaks to children and asks them to share the message with others. You don’t have to wait until you grow up.

Children are so precious. In the time of Samuel they were not given the same status as they are today – they were treated as nobodies. They were not seen as belonging to their parents but rather were viewed as a gift from God. Hence Samuel as a boy is taken by his mother to be raised in the temple and to serve the priest Eli.

Sometimes I think children have become too precious today. We expect too much from them and we are overly anxious about whether they’re achieving what hey should achieve. As many of you know I put in an angry letter to the Gazette this week complaining about the recent Ofsted inspection of my children’s primary school. I’m not against inspections of schools they are important. I just think it’s all getting out of hand. When you have a senior figure in Ofsted being quoted as saying ‘they know they are doing the right thing by the fact of the low morale in teachers, when they keep shifting the goalposts in the criteria that they judge schools o that one year you can be classified good and the next inspection you have the same level of achievement but are now classified as satisfactory, when primary school teachers are told that from the moment a child arrives in the class they have to be engaged in active learning – none of this sitting on the carpet and sharing together – it all seems as though it is going too far in the quest for higher and higher standards. If we are not careful we will squeeze the life out of our children. The teachers are already on life support.

Children are too precious to be precious about.

**Samuel found himself in a pace to hear God**.

Crucially we all need space, rest, silence, room for contemplation, an environment that fosters the spirit – if you hothouse children too much you boil them up and they become too dry for any good.

Likewise in ourselves – if we become too intense, too driven, and too busy – we are in danger of ending up dry and exhausted. How do we nourish our spiritual lives?

Samuel found himself in the temple. He slept in the room with the Ark of the Covenant – the symbol of God’s presence. If we want to ear God then it’s more likely that we will hear God if we put ourselves more consciously in place where we are more likely to hear.

.*‘God is always present to us, but we are not always present to him’ (Julian of Norwich*)

This is not just about going to church and being in worship – but that is important – taking time out to stop, reflect, pray, refocus, intentionally come into God’s presence. But it could be taking time out during the day, starting the day in prayer and reading the scriptures, listening to a CD on the way to work or just giving yourself a bit of space.

**Listening to God is not easy. Samuel needed Eli’s help** to realize that God was speaking for him and to get ready to listen. (Nathanael needed Philip’s urging before he paid any attention to Jesus.) I guess we can all Identify people who have taught us how to recognize God’s voice – teachers, special friends or relatives, even children.

The older generation often needs younger ones to show us how to use our electronic gadgets and computers. In a similar way the younger generation often calls on the experience of older people when they have their own problems and are unsure about how to deal with them. Mum, dad, granny, granddad, aunty, uncle often come into their own as they pass on things they have learned. We need each other to help us live lives to the full. Even when people have died and passed on their influence still lives on, for better or for ill – to be honest. We need God’s wisdom to work through that.

Eli sadly was man who couldn’t control and inspire his own sons. They had grown up to be corrupt and not worthy of becoming leaders in their country. Yet Eli was to have a profound and good influence on young Samuel.

**Listening to God is not easy**.

Prayer is communication: calling and responding to God. Prayer is an openness to encounter more of God, but also to understand more of yourself in the process - to look at your own life direction and attitudes: *‘How can you expect to be heard by God, when you do not hear yourself’ (Cyprian).* Prayer is also about the world - difficult situations, problems etc. and finding the way forward with God.

Back when the telegraph was the fastest method of long-distance communication, a young man applied for a job as a Morse code operator. Answering an ad in the newspaper he went to the office address and found a large busy office filled with noise and clatter, including the sound of the telegraph in the background. A sign on the receptionist desk instructed the job applicants to fill out a form and wait until they were summoned to enter the inner office.

The young man filled out his form and sat down with the seven other applicants in the waiting room. After a few minutes the young man stood up crossed the room to the door of the inner office and walked right in. naturally the other applicant perked up, wondering what was going on. The muttered among themselves that they hadn’t heard any summons yet. They assumed that he young man who went out made a mistake and would be disqualified.

Within a few minutes however the employer escorted the young man out of the office and said to the other applicants ‘ thank you very much for coming but the job has just been filled.

The other applicants began grumbling to each other and one spoke up and said ‘what’s going on he was the last to come in and we never got a chance to be interviewed. Yet he got the job. That’s not fair,

The employer said ‘I’m sorry, but all the time you’ve been sitting here the telegraph has been ticking out the message in Morse code: ‘If you understand this message, then come right in.the job is yours.’ None of you heard it o understood it. This young man did. The job is his,

We live in a world that is full of busyness and clatter, like that office. People distracted and unable to hear the still small voice of God. Are we tuned in to god’s voice?

**Can we Identify ways God speaks*.*** In this story God speaks through a voice that Samuel can hear with his ears. But God speaks in other ways too. Sometimes we read something in the Bible and know it is meant for us. Sometimes when we are scared or sad, we feel God very close to us helping us be brave. Sometimes when we are outside, we see something God has made and feel God loving us. Sometimes we have a feeling deep inside that God wants us to do something to take care of another person.

I love the description of how God will speak through Samuel and it will ‘ring in the ears of all who hear it’.in another version it says I will make their ears tingle!

Sometimes you feel like your ears are tingling when God is speaking.

If you have been following Nicky gumbel’s Bible through the year notes on the internet this week you will recall how he looked at the story of how Abraham’s servant was guided o find Rebekah as a wife for Jacob. [Genesis 24:1–67](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis%2024:1–67)

Abraham’s servant was not embarrassed to pray for success. He asked to be guided by God.

This is one of the most remarkable stories of God’s guidance. On Alpha Course Gumble writes how he talks about five ways in which God guides us, under the heading of ‘the five CSs’.

Commanding Scripture

*Obviously, Abraham did not have the Scriptures that we have – but he did have the commands of God which later became part of the Scriptures. God commanded his people to marry only other believers in him. Abraham told his servant he must not get a wife for his son from the Canaanites, but from his own people (vv.3–4).*

* *Compelling Spirit*

*The Holy Spirit leads us as we pray. Although the words ‘Holy Spirit’ are not used in this passage, it is clear that all the participants are in position to be guided by God, listening to him and being led by the Spirit. The servant prayed, ‘Make me successful today’ (v.12). Rebekah appeared ‘before he had finished praying’ (v.15). It was a prayer from the heart, ‘before I finished praying in my heart, Rebekah came out’ (v.45). When Rebekah appeared, Isaac was out in the field where he had gone out in the evening to meditate (v.63).*

* *Common Sense*

*The choice of Rebekah made sense. She was clearly someone who was appropriate for Isaac. It so happened that she was ‘very beautiful’ (v.16). She was also ‘a virgin; no man had ever slept with her’ (v.16). Most importantly, she was clearly generous, gracious and kind. Her immediate response to the request for water was not only to offer it, but also to say, ‘I’ll draw water for your camels too, until they have had enough to drink’ (v.19).*

* *Counsel of the Saints*

*Although this was very different from the modern western marriage in that it involved a large element of arrangement, nevertheless there was also an element of choice. Rebekah was asked, ‘ “Will you go with this man?” “I will go,” she said’ (v.57). Isaac chose to marry her and ‘loved her’ (v.67). They were following the counsel of the saints in the sense that everyone around, especially their parents, recognised, ‘This is from the Lord’ (v.50).*

* *Circumstantial Signs*

*This is one of the clearest cases in the Bible of God guiding through circumstantial signs. The servant asks for a sign and was given exactly what he asked for (vv.12–26). However, as we have seen, the sign was not random. It was a test of Rebekah’s character which she fulfilled.*

Some of those elements are present in this story. Samuel has a compelling spirit in his heart. He has the counsel of Eli. He has a circumstantial sign in going back to sleep and if he is woken again that God is calling him.

Eli helps him understand God’s call. A sense of calling to something is called a Vocation and comes from the Latin vocare, to call, and means the work a man is called to by God.

-There are all different kinds of voices calling you to all different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of Society, say, or the Superego, or Self-Interest.

-The world lacks any sense of what Scripture describes as “calling,” or what Christians later termed “vocation”—a perspective that God has called and equipped people to serve Him through their work in the world. Instead, our culture encourages us to climb a work/identity ladder that is ultimately self-serving, and often self-destructive.

What is God’s call on our lives? For some it is to a specific career. For some it is a ministry in the church – whilst they do work to pay the bills. For some it is a calling to raise a family. Different callings. But we believe we are the priesthood of all believers. God calls all of us to different roles and responsibilities.

Have we discovered our gifts and strengths? Are we using them? What might God be calling us to do with these gifts? Has the church community recognized and encouraged those gifts –sometimes we are distracted and can’t see what is under our nose.

-Neither the hair shirt nor the soft berth will do. The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet. Buchner. -One doesn't fulfill his vocation just by doing the things God sent him to do but also by letting things be done to him that God allows to be done to him...Henri Nouwen

Last week we were wrestling with questions of identity and the meaning of life. A poem written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in prison, as he waited to be executed by the Nazis. ends when he writes, " 'Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine. Whoever I am, thou knowest, O [God], I am thine.'" While we immerse ourselves in identity politics and divide our communities by labels, setting one group against another, we are reassured that we belong to God and that we are intimately and steadfastly loved. We are "not mass-produced but custom-made," There is a story about "young Rabbi Zusya, who was quite discouraged about his failures and weaknesses. Said an older rabbi to him, 'When you get to heaven, God is not going to say to you, "Why weren't you Moses?" No, God will say, "Why weren't you Zusya?" So why don't you stop trying to be Moses, and start being the Zusya God created you to be?'"

And this profound sense of our identity and our belonging to God, of God's ongoing creation of us, of our being called and then called again, each one of us with our unique gifts and life story

God’s call to Samuel initially involved him bringing a tough message to Eli. God was going to replace him and his sons from their priestly office. Samuel had to announce their notice. Eli to his credit understands the message and concedes power gracefully. He hands over to the younger generation.

Eli represents the vested interests who are used to having their way, and had lost the plot, grown corrupt, were far from the heart of God, of seeking their own ends, rather than seeking the interests of God or the people whom they serve. By contrast, Samuel represents those to whom no one ever listens, the people who are regularly dismissed as unimportant, peripheral, or out of touch with “the real world.” It is such people, the text shouts in whom the Lord delights in using as conduits for bringing the Word to the people.

Like so many other biblical narratives, we identify with the underdog, Samuel, yet the sad truth is that we are always in danger of ending up like doddering Eli, having lost sight of what our mission is, and unable to hear to anything that might correct us.

God continually raises up unlikely vessels to be the bearer of his word.

Eli overcame his prejudices – he could’ve dismissed what Samuel had to say as the voice of youth. In the gospel passage Nathanael couldn’t believe that anyone from Nazareth could say anything worth listening to. Only because his friend Philip insisted that Jesus was worth meeting, did he pay any attention at all to Jesus.

Today is the USA they celebrate Martin Luther King’s birthday, who of course challenged prejudice. There are all sorts of tensions in this world between different peoples and different ages. There can be a prejudice against age – you’re too old, or you’re too young. Recently through the Stephen Lawrence case we have been reminded of the ugly fact of racism in our society. We all know too well of the prejudice that many have against people of faith.

**Friends can help people get past their prejudices to hear God.** Just as Philip insisted that Nathanael meet Jesus, friends can insist that others step past their prejudices to meet others. Eli’s friendship with Samuel obviously enabled him to listen to what God was saying through this young boy.

May we listen out for God’s call on our lives even from the most unlikely sources. Is that you lord? Here I am.

Draw a picture or enlarge a picture of different types of animal’s ears
have some fun guessing which ear belongs to which animal. End with the picture of a human ear.

Summarize the Old Testament story of God calling Samuel and the call of Philip from the Gospel reading. Where do we hear the call of God today? Take the picture of the ear to the following places:

-the lectern - with the Word of God we hear God’s call in God’s Word
-the choir – we hear God’s call in music and song, from our hymns and prayers when we stop long enough to listen.
-The congregation - we hear God’s call through friends and family comforting us guiding us nurturing us.
-the door – we hear God’s call in the most unexpected places, from people we have just met,
-a TV guide or newspaper - God might speak to us from movies we see and newspapers we read.

Bring the ear back to the front of the church and hold it against your heart.."And we hear God calling from within. " Rev David Cameron

3. Play "follow the leader" with the children. As the children walk behind you, following you, sing this song to the tune of Frere Jacques:
Come and follow, come and follow,
Me today. Me today.
Follow me where I go, follow me where I go.
One and all. One and all.

**alk**
**Give five kids a simply drawn face each, one happy (for Samuel), one sad (for Eli), one sleepy (for Samuel when he is asleep), one exhausted (for all the times Samuel runs) and one awestruck (for when God is mentioned). Then tell the story from the Samuel reading and get kids to hold aloft the face appropriate to the part of the story they hear.**

**Congregational Voice Drama: Samuel's Call**
**Tell or read the story based on the 1 Samuel reading for the day. Have the congregation respond to various words in the story. For example every time they hear the word "Samuel" have them shout "Yes, Lord!". Other responses to include might be: for the word "God" - Woah!; for the word "run" - puff, puff, puff; for the word "sleep" get them to snore and for the word "Eli" have them all say "I can't control my kids!" This is obviously a kid's talk when it is done like this, but the rest of the congregation really enjoys the activity and they seem to have almost more fun than the kids.**

**Kid's Talk**
**Give five kids a simply drawn face each, one happy (for Samuel), one sad (for Eli), one sleepy (for Samuel when he is asleep), one exhausted (for all the times Samuel runs) and one awestruck (for when God is mentioned). Then tell the story from the Samuel reading and get kids to hold aloft the face appropriate to the part of the story they hear.**

**Response Activity:**
Give everyone a card with the following three options printed on it
1. I am not sure about God's call to me
a) I would like to talk to somebody about this
b) I would be interested in finding out more about my spiritual gifts, talents and abilities
c)I need some encouragement

2. I have an idea of what God's call to me is but for various reasons I am a little hesitant about it all.
a) I would like to talk to somebody about this
b) I would be interested in finding out more about my spiritual gifts, talents and abilities
c) I would appreciate some training in this area
d)I need some encouragement

3. I know what God has called me to do
a) I would like to talk to somebody about this
b) I would appreciate some training in this area
c )I need some encouragement

Tell people they have a choice whether to keep this activity to themselves or to share it. Ask people to consider the three options and to cirle the one that is most like where they are at. After a time, tell them to consider carefully the three or four options in the section which they have chosen and to tick the one that speaks to them the most. If they would like to think more about it, suggest they take it home with them. If they would like some follow up on what they have ticked, suggest that they put their name on their card and put it in the offering plate when it comes around.