

after 1st February 2009

First reading - the call of Samuel.

A nice little story
we may have heard in Sunday School.

But it starts so sadly.

1 Samuel 3. 1

*The boy Samuel ministered
before the Lord under Eli.
In those days the word of the Lord
was rare.
There were not many visions.*

Israel's history is built
on stories of encounter with God.
You might describe the Old Testament as
the accounts of God revealing himself to people.

And Israel is prominent in this story
because they are God's chosen people.
They have a special relationship with God.
God speaks to them, and they obey.

And it has all gone wrong.

This is a very dark age on Israel's history.
The end of the time of the Judges
stories about Samson and Delilah
and other blood-thirsty tales.
Nobody does what God says
nobody hears from God.

All that is about to change.

In the big picture of Israel's history
we had Moses in Egypt, and the Exodus.

About 1446 BC.

God spoke to Moses face to face.

Then after the Exodus, the 40 years in the desert
comes Joshua and the Settlement in Canaan.
And God spoke to Joshua face to face.

That was about 1406 BC.

But after Joshua, comes the time of the Judges.
When now and again,
there was a faithful servant of the Lord
to hear from God and lead Israel
but also times of spiritual dryness
when they forgot about their special relationship.

That takes us another 350 years to 1055 BC.
The death of Samson.

What comes next is the time of the Kings.
Saul, David, Solomon, and then a load of others
taking us from 1050 BC to about 600 BC - 450 years

and the time of the Kings is also
the time of the great Prophets, Elijah and Elisha,
then Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel.

So where we are tonight is on that transition -
the end of the Dark Ages, the Judges
and the beginning of the Prophets.

Samuel is to grow up to be - the last of the Judges -
and the anointer of Kings.

The circumstances of his birth were special -
not as special as Jesus
but there are striking parallels
between his mother Hannah, and Jesus' mother Mary.

He has now been given, as a young child,
to serve God for the rest of his life.

But of course, they hadn't got a relationship with God
only a religion.

So the way that he serves God
is to be a servant in the Temple
looking after the old Priest Eli
trimming the lamps and the candles etc.

And that is where God reaches out to him.

His job is not to trim lamps
but hear from God, and speak it to the nation.

So - young Samuel - totally given to God -
but totally unknowing God.

verse 7

*Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord
the word of the Lord had not yet
been revealed to him.*

Now we might like to think
"How extraordinary!
This young man is a servant of the Lord
and he does not yet know the Lord?"

How can anybody serve God in ministry
and yet not yet know him.

Surely that comes first.

Yet I look around today
at the people approved by the church
to serve God in ministry

clergy, Bishops, all sorts of people
and although I ought not to pass judgement
yet I often cannot see any fruit in their lives
to demonstrate that they have a relationship with God.

Worldly secular thinking
often bad language
no idea of the Grace of God
and no experience of hearing God's voice.

Indeed, even in the church,
those who claim to have heard the voice of God
are looked on, at best, as eccentrics,
and verging on insanity.

The attitude seems to be
"Yes, God could speak, if he wanted -
but he usually leaves it to us."

Now in my experience
God does expect us to think things through
but as we do, he speaks to us
to confirm, or to correct and re-direct.
He never leaves us to muddle through.

Israel was muddling through
but this is about to change.

So God calls Samuel.
Eli realises what is happening
and enables Samuel to hear God's voice.

His first message is terrible -
it is a telling off for Eli his master
that he is a failure, and will die as punishment.

Eli knows it is true, accepts the word
and so encourages Samuel in his ministry.

And then - exciting stuff -
God's approval for Samuel
is made clear to the nation
and Samuel becomes their leader.
verse 19

*The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up
and the Lord 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.

And Samuel's words came to all Israel.

Light is dawning for Israel.

Now we move on 1100 year more or less
to Jesus' time.

Have things changed? No.

The people of God in Jesus' time
do not know the word of God
do not have visions.

Even with Jesus, the living Word, among them
they still do not understand.

And so Jesus teaches them, not with lessons
but with stories and pictures.

Why? because they cannot understand.

He quotes Isaiah's call to them, from Isaiah 6

*You will be ever hearing,
but never understanding
you will be ever seeing,
but not perceiving.*

It is true today.

The church can tell the world so clearly
what God has to say,
and they pass laws to stop us saying it.

But the point is this.

All the time that Israel thought God was silent
it was, in fact, that they had gone deaf.

And in a way this would not change.

Isaiah's call to speak to a people
who would not hear
Jeremiah's call to speak to a people
whose hearts were hard
and whose necks were stiff

they came after Samuel.

It is always so.

But today God still has words for his people.
He has words for all people.

And we need to speak them
whether or not the hearers will listen.

If people go wrong,
if the nation or the world goes wrong
because they have not heard their Maker's instructions
it must not be because we kept quiet.

We may have to speak in parables, in stories and pictures
but we need to tell it as God sees it
proclaim Godly values
and when appropriate, call people to repentance.

That is our task, laws or no laws, and we must not shrink.

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