

‘When seeing is believing’ Sermon first preached by Dr Christine Hoffman at FUMC Palmetto, 11th January, 2009

The song we sang a few minutes ago asks a good question: ‘Would I have answered when you called, “Come follow, follow me!”?’ It asks us to put ourselves in the place of those whom the earthly Jesus encountered. It challenges each of us with the question: would I have given up familiar ways to follow Jesus and would I have kept on following or would I have given up when the going got tough? Would I have deserted Jesus at the crucifixion, maybe even become part of the crowd shouting: ‘Crucify!’ The point of the song, of course, is not a hypothetical question so much as a challenge to each of us now to be attentive to the call to follow and to trust in God’s strength to keep on following. But what if we respond: I don’t seem to have heard from God recently? It’s all right for those who could hear the human voice of Jesus, but we’re in a different situation. God’s communication seems to have become a bit rare.

Both of our scriptures today revolve around God’s attempts to communicate with us to help us live as he intends us to live. Our gospel focuses our attention on two men who saw God in Jesus and followed. First Philip who seems instantly to find in Jesus the fulfillment of all his Jewish hopes. Then Nathanael, also known as Bartholomew, who seems to need a bit of persuading. He becomes impressed by Jesus’ inexplicable knowledge of him but Jesus replies: ‘You ain’t seen nothing yet.’ Perhaps we can identify with Nathanael, as he has to learn a believing response not based on empirical evidence. It is by believing and therefore following Jesus that he truly comes to see God. In his encounter with Christ, he experiences the propelling presence of God. Jesus is the point of contact between the finite and the infinite, the conjunction of time and eternity. ‘The vision of God’s glory that Nathanael is promised unfolds as Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. ... The unveiling of the glory of God occurs in the history of Jesus, in the mysterious conjunction of crucifixion and exaltation.’¹ John’s gospel is trying to teach each of us that God’s communicates to us in the course of discipleship. As we try to follow Jesus and tell the good news to other people, then we put ourselves in the way of God’s communication. It is as we walk with Jesus that we learn who he is. As we learn who he is, we learn what it means to follow him. It is not obedience to an abstract set of codes, but consent to a costly, joyful relationship. Seeing is believing.

As Nathanael in the New Testament gives us some help in learning how God communicates with us, so also does Samuel in the Old Testament. The passage we heard this morning begins with an arrestingly modern note: ‘The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.’ Yes, we say; we can identify with this. God seems to be asleep so far as most people are concerned; perhaps even so far as we Christians are concerned. After all, when did you last have a vision? But then perhaps the problem is with us rather than with God. As with Samuel, perhaps we are the ones who are sleeping, whilst God is very much awake. Perhaps we have become dulled to God’s presence around us. Physical, mental, emotional tiredness can leave our hearts, minds, and souls unable to sense God’s activity in our lives. Even in worship in the

¹ Lee Barrett in *Feasting on the Word* Year B Volume 1, edit. David L Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Westminster John Knox Press, 2008, p 264

sanctuary we may have become strangely immune to God's addressing us by name. Isn't there some humor in this passage from the first book of Samuel? For one thing, you'd think that Samuel would be expecting to receive communication from God in the Temple of all places. Indeed, it is often suggested that this is why Samuel has gone to the Temple – to receive a revelation. Yet in reality the voice of God is so unexpected that Samuel thinks, when he hears his name, that it must be Eli calling. It is quite possible for a sanctuary to become a sort of museum, commemorating a God who has spoken at other times and in other places to other people instead of a home for the living God speaking to us right now.

I lived for twenty years in and near the city of Canterbury, England. As you probably know, there is a very famous cathedral in that city. Indeed, it is one of the UK's top tourist attractions. Besides the worship services that go on there, for instance, the daily choral evensong, there is one other time when everyone's attention is drawn to the fact that this magnificent building is not a museum but a place of worship. On the hour, everyone who is present in the cathedral at that time, wherever they are and whatever they are looking at, is asked to share in a brief prayer spoken by one of the clergy. Occasionally, I've been in the cathedral at that time and I've noticed that some people look surprised, even shocked, to be asked to pray. 'Pray? Who to? God? Who's that?', you can imagine them thinking. But before we are too critical of such people, let's remember that any of us can become blind and deaf to God, even in our prayers, even in our hymns, even in our sharing of scripture. Strangely enough, it can be the very people who are leading worship who can miss the vital address of God. As a preacher, a liturgist, an organist, a pianist, a member of the choir, it is quite possible to go through the motions when you are doing your bit and God doesn't get a look in. I have occupied all of those roles at one time or another and it is very easy to fall into the habit of 'sorting things out' at critical times in the service. When the scripture is being read, I may find myself arranging my music or any of us may find ourselves glancing at the bulletin. I do notice, however, from my vantage point in the choir in 2nd service that everyone in the pew pays close attention to the gospel when Stephen delivers it from memory rather than reads it. And as I sit in the congregation in first service, I too find it truly arresting. But on other occasions, any of one of us may find ourselves not truly listening to the scripture. Strange, isn't it, how we allow other things to become more urgent than listening – listening just in case God has something he wants to communicate to us. It's surely a question of expectation and we may well this morning be able to appreciate the funny biting commentary of the writer of this morning's Old Testament passage that Samuel doesn't seem really to expect to hear God in the Temple.

There's a bit more Jewish comedy in this passage too. The Lord calls 'Samuel, Samuel: pronounced in Hebrew 'Samu-el, Samu-el' which means 'God has heard'. The boy says: 'Here I am!' and runs to the priest Eli. 'Eli' is the Hebrew for 'My God' (remember when Jesus is on the cross, he cries out with words from Psalm 22: 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachtani?' – 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?') But Eli has not called Samuel. God calls again: 'Samu-el: God has heard' and again the boy goes to Eli, 'my God', rather than to God himself. It still does not occur to him that he might be hearing God. Nor does it occur to the priest Eli. A third time the Lord says: 'Samu-el;

God has heard' and at last Eli (truly awake for the first time in many years we gather) instructs the boy to answer: 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.' At last, Samuel does hear God speaking, but note what it takes for this to happen. The writer puts it this way: 'Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, "Samu-el, Samu-el!" And at last, he responds in the way Eli has suggested: 'Speak, for your servant is listening.'

I read something very powerful in my devotions recently. Let me share it with you: 'In a world of endless distraction and haste, rarely do we pay attention – really pay attention – to someone else. To lay aside our calendars and schedules and just listen and be fully present to someone is the greatest gift. All dying persons want only this gift. How desperately the living ones wish for it too.'² We can grasp, can't we, that at the moment of death, the person dying, if conscious of our presence, wants our full attention. So also do the living. We sometimes get the feeling that someone isn't giving us his or her full attention. If we are speaking at the time, we might even ask: 'Are you listening?' by which we mean: 'Are you really listening to me? Are you giving me your full attention? Are you hearing me rather than letting your own preoccupations continue their running commentary?' And if we're honest, we know that we too are sometimes guilty of doing this very thing to someone else. I have the annoying habit of finishing Stephen's sentences for him. He will let me finish and then say: 'What I was going to say'. What he then says is nothing like what I'd suggested. Whether with words or gestures or a look or simply just being in front of us, someone is trying to communicate something but we are not really listening or listening long enough. I've a lot on my mind; we might excuse ourselves by saying. Well, that's just it, isn't it? *I* have a lot on *my* mind. Eli probably had a lot on his mind. Samuel probably had a lot on his mind. But when they take seriously the possibility that God himself might be speaking, then they listen. God then finds a way to communicate what's on *his* mind. God must get pretty tired of our finishing his sentences for him. Maybe we sometimes don't even let him start.

But the comedy of this passage isn't over. Indeed, it now becomes slapstick as God, once he has got Samuel's ear says: 'Are you listening? Do you hear what I am saying now? Once he has established that Samuel has heard him, he says: 'See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle.' I love this mixture of imagery of seeing and hearing in this passage. 'See, I am about to speak.' If someone says to us: 'Lookie here' (a lovely phrase, by the way, which we Brits don't have), then we expect to see something. If someone says: 'Listen up; we expect to hear something. But this passage, and other parts of the Old Testament, mix these right up. Remember this passage began by saying: 'the word of the LORD was rare in those days: visions were not widespread'. But then the story that follows doesn't include a vision, not in the sense of some visual experience, external or internal, through which God communicates. True, it says 'the LORD came and stood there' but we are given no description of God appearing to Samuel in the way, for instance, that he appeared to Isaiah in the Temple. Isaiah, we are told, saw the LORD high and lifted up and his train filled the Temple. No Samuel doesn't 'see' anything but he does hear. Seeing here is believing. If we insist that for God to communicate with us, he has got to do something dramatic, then we might continue to miss his communication. I love what Noni has put

² *Attention/Intention*, Contemplative Outreach LTD, 2005, p 33

on the front of our bulletins this morning. It depicts Samuel somehow 'seeing the light', as we say. We simply don't know quite how; God's method of communication isn't clear. But what is clear is that Samuel gets the message and responds.

I've recently joined Face book, on the computer. I've been amused to learn the phrase used when someone puts a message on Face book for me to read. I get it with the phrase: 'So and so wrote on Christine's wall'. And when I write a message for someone else, then they receive an email communication: 'Christine wrote on so and so's wall.' I'm rather new to this and I still get the uneasy feeling that when I look on my wall to see what someone has written, it might be rather a disturbing message. After all, we have the phrase: the writing on the wall. And where does that phrase come from? You may recall that it comes from the Book of Daniel, where the mysterious writing appears on the wall at Belshazzar's feast. This writing on the wall may be interpreted: 'You've been weighed in the balance and found wanting.' Well, fortunately none of my friends on Face book has sent me such a message. Yet. But then it's early days.

For Samuel, however, the message God sends on his Face book is disturbing. The news is not good for Eli, whose sons have disgraced the priestly line and illustrated the need for kings. Because the priests have not represented God faithfully, God must anoint a conventional king. This is where Samuel is going to have listen very attentively to God if he is to fulfill the role God wants him to play. Fortunately, when Samuel is brave enough to pass on to Eli the message that God has given him, Eli doesn't resist. Eli – the one with the ironic name, the blind man, the disgraced priest who has failed to discipline his sons- is the man who introduces Samuel to God. Eli may be blind in more ways than one, but he has seen enough to be of help. All of us in our ministries, whatever they may be, may be blind at times, but fortunately, we can do God's work in spite of ourselves. We can be the ones to mediate God to others even when are not always seeing completely straight or hearing entirely clearly. Even Samuel, as we learn if we read on in this book of the Bible has sons who will be scoundrels no less than Eli's. We read in chapter 8, that Samuel will become a kingmaker only after failing as a father.

'This comic, tender, tragic story really does come from modern life. In an age of divine reticence and the all-too-human failings of religious leaders, it speaks to every servant weighed down with fatigue or regret. Are we Samuel? Are we Eli? Can we really be sure which? And what shall we do if the living God comes into our troubled temple? It is Eli, ironically enough, who tells us what to say: "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening."³

This scripture challenges each of us cultivate a listening ear for God. 'When was the last time you felt a "tingle" about the word of God to you? When was the last time you experienced hope kicking into high gear, forgiveness writ loud, pins and needles all over your body because you were so excited? With its promise of "pins and needles", this passage is a kind of spiritual acupuncture. It brings us by way of thrilling news to a time of renewal and forgiveness.'⁴ We can all probably recall experiencing the tingle of fear,

³ Lawrence Wood, in *Feasting on the Word*, p 247

⁴ Donna Shaper, *ibid* p 244

when, for instance we heard the doctor say our cancer was back, when we feared that our job or our pension was going to be taken away, when we came so close to having an accident that we had to stop and rest a minute in order to experience our body's adrenalin rush. What this passage recommends to us is that we begin to make decisions based on the tingle of hope. Did you notice that the passage assures us that what God is going to do make both ears tingle? What an interesting idea. Maybe we are allowed to have one ear tingle with fear. A certain amount of fear may be spiritually legitimate. But listen now with the other hear: Hear what Samuel was reluctant to hear: God is going to do a new thing, which will make both of our ears tingle. Give the other ear a little exercise. Let it tingle too.... God has plans, already executed in Jesus, to do good things. The way to tingle is to open both of your eyes and look around.... Look forward in hope. Open both of your ears. Soon they will tingle.'⁵

Those who have bothered to tell us, in the Bible, stories of Philip, Nathanael, and Samuel are not writing simply to give us information. They are writing to give us inspiration. They want to inspire each of us to be ready to see and believe. They want to encourage each of us to say regularly to God: 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'

⁵ Ibid, p 246