

14th January 2024

Sermon: 1 Samuel 3: 1-20

Let's take it back a little and put this passage in context. The first book of Samuel starts with Hannah. Her and her husband have been unable to conceive a child and on their annual visit to the temple in the big city Hannah pours out her heart, her lips moving wordlessly in prayer with such heartfelt passion that Eli, the high priest thinks she's drunk and tells her to get a grip and sober up, she's a disgrace. When Hannah explains, Eli is embarrassed and sympathises with her and tells her, may God answer your prayer.

God does, and Samuel is born. Hannah is filled with joy and she sings a song which is echoed later in the song of Mary and becomes the song of the church - *The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength...the Lord raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap.* Just like Mary, she is subversive in her singing and praying. Samuel's mother, just like the mother of Jesus, was fierce and strong and angry at injustice. Mothers, who were the primary influence over their sons, who in turn both became fierce and strong and angry at injustice.

Hannah is a forerunner of Khalil Gibran, a Lebanese writer whose biblically inspired book *The Prophet* contains words that may be familiar to you, sometimes used in infant baptisms. Gibran writes this:

*Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you,
And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.*

Hannah felt Samuel belonged to God as much as to her, and when he's only a toddler she takes him to the temple and to Eli and asks that the child become Eli's apprentice. It's a strange thing to do when her son is so young, and Eli has pretty much failed as a father – his sons are described as scoundrels, so I wonder whether Hannah had doubts about the safeguarding of Samuel. Eli doesn't appear to be the wisest or most astute of people – remember he mistook her praying for intoxication.

Hannah and her husband, and her subsequent children, don't live in Jerusalem. They live about 13 miles away in the hill country in Ephraim. They make an annual pilgrimage to the temple, where we are told, Hannah gives Samuel new robes each year. Is that the only time she sees him, I wonder? 13 miles is a long way to walk when you have other small children to care for. I can picture her at home, sewing love into these garments as she waits impatiently for that day when she can see him again, her heart swelling with pride and love. How hard it would be for her to walk away each time. Those of us who are empty-nesters might recognise how hard it is to watch our children leave home even when they are technically adults, so I can't imagine how soul destroying it was to do this when Samuel was so young. Was her heart broken, just like Mary's, knowing her son was destined for holy and mighty deeds and not the ordinary safety of family life?

Eli is already pretty old, and by the time we come to our passage today Samuel has been living in the temple and performing temple duties under Eli's instruction for some time. Eli's eyesight is failing and he becomes reliant upon this youngster.

Towards the beginning of our reading, we hear this sentence: *The word of the Lord was rare in those days*. It's easy to make assumptions about biblical times, as if the majority of people were faithful and committed, and although there are stories about people going astray or even working against God's will, that somehow the world, or at least the world around Israel, was generally full of holy folk. Eli's sons, those scoundrels who had no regard for God, were the unusual ones, or so we think.

We make these assumptions about years gone by in this country too – when we talk about the declining numbers in church, we speak as if everyone 100 years ago went to church and that in turn meant they were living better, more Christian lives than people today. The word of the Lord in times gone by wasn't rare, we tell ourselves. We are living in godless times by comparison.

But here we have in the first book of Samuel this strange phrase: the word of the Lord was rare in those days. This particular phrase doesn't occur anywhere else in the Hebrew scriptures. That word rare is often ascribed to something precious like a jewel, something incredibly unusual and extremely valuable because it was in such short supply.

The word of the Lord was unusual, extremely precious because there was so little of it about.

What is rare in our days? What is incredibly unusual? Peace is something precious and in desperate short supply in parts of the world. This past week, I have been dismayed by yet again bombs being used by our government to try and solve a problem in the Middle East. We have relative peace in this country – how much do we take that for granted?

Is honesty rare in our days? Some politicians treat truth as a commodity to be exploited, and we've become used to the concept that *my* truth can be different from *yours*. We have "alternative facts" and are in a "post-truth" era, where astonishing things are believed and that which is true can be disputed.

The word of the Lord was rare in those days. We're only a few weeks on from Christmas, where, if you were in church at some point you will probably have heard the beginning of John's gospel – *in the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the word was God*. The bible contains the word of God, but the word of God as we know it is Jesus. The word of the Lord was rare in those days – God stepping into humanity, into the dirt and mess of life was in short supply – we think of God's absence sometimes today, but the same was true in Samuel's time. People doubted where God was, they couldn't find God, they didn't notice where God was breaking through.

And yet, despite the word of the Lord being rare, both in the days of Samuel and our own, we are told, the lamp of God had not yet gone out. In the depths of winter, in the depths of war, in the depths of a cost-of-living crisis, in the depths of striking doctors

and an NHS falling apart before our eyes, in the depths of the climate crisis, in the depths of the possibility of Trump taking office for a second time, it is hard to see where the light is. It is easy to despair when all around there is darkness. But here we have hope – when we assume God is absent, when we assume the days ahead will only bring more bad news, the lamp of God has not yet gone out.

We act as if that light has already been extinguished, or waiting in the expectation that it will go out, but I am drawn back to that message of Christmas – the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it. In Samuel's time, that lamp of God had not yet gone out, and by the time we get to the birth of Jesus we find that light still hasn't gone out, and instead is burning bright. There is hope. Not unrealistic hope. Not a hope that denies the facts. But a hope that says God's light hasn't gone out, it's still here, and maybe we need to blow on that spark, feed that fire rather than passively waiting for it to burn itself out.

I see that light in the heart of the darkness of the bombing campaign in Gaza through the Al Jazeera correspondent Wael al-Dahdouh – you may have come across him – his wife, his 7-year-old daughter and 15-year-old son were killed back in October, along with eight other family members, and this past week his eldest son has also been killed. And yet incredibly, he continues to report, wearing his bulletproof jacket emblazoned with the word 'Press', determined to tell the truth about what is happening to the Palestinian people. This is the light that is being talked about here – that when all is lost, this man continues to report with tears in his eyes, speaking the truth, taking his personal pain and demonstrating that the lamp of God has not yet gone out.

At night, when we're trying to rest, we can be suddenly awoken by strange noises, real or imagined. Samuel woke with a jolt – had he heard something? He wasn't sure, but he thought Eli might be asking for something, so like the diligent youngster he is, he gets up and attends to his mentor. Eli isn't impressed and send him back to bed. By the second time this happens, you'd think Eli might be suspicious, but we know he's not the wisest of people.

And we are told, Samuel did not yet know the Lord. That word 'yet' is important. Throughout the bible we have all sorts of people who don't know God – Pharaoh, for example, and other godless folk who commit terrible crimes – it is not flattering in scripture to be referred to as not knowing God, but that word 'yet' changes this. It suggests growth, openness, willingness. Samuel, someone who was being formed by Eli, a sponge ready to soak up instruction and information. Samuel knows why he's been living in the temple – his life is to be dedicated to God, but he doesn't yet know God. He's never experienced God, never heard God, certainly never seen God.

I am always suspicious when people claim their motivations to do something that appears not quite right is because God told them to do it. Religious history is peppered with people claiming righteousness because of direct divine intervention, and not all of them have positive results. Indeed, some have catastrophic consequences. We've heard this past week of the Nigerian pastor TB Joshua and the abuse experienced

though him and his Synagogue Church of All Nations. His actions justified because *God told him*. Hearing God's voice needs testing, to see if it is genuine, and often that comes through others, and sometimes through formal church processes.

Fortunately, Samuel's calling was tested. He doubted he was hearing God's voice until someone else told him that's what was being said. I think many of us question and doubt whether we are genuinely experiencing God, hearing God, seeing God, and it takes the saints in our age to point out that maybe this is God. Eli, who is cynical to the lamp of God, who no longer sees the light, who gets it wrong, but is still able eventually to direct Samuel to recognise where God is present.

And the message God has for Samuel is one which will make ears tingle.

What makes us tingle? Excitement? Nervousness? Anticipation? Fear? Dread? Feeling your whole body tingle is an extreme emotion. What makes your hair stand on end? When do you get goosebumps, other than in the cold? What news do you hear and your body tingles? Sometimes absolutely wonderful news – other times, dreadful news.

God has news that makes us tingle – it is the news from Hannah's song, from Mary's song – news to make the poor and vulnerable tingle that life will change, that they will be lifted above their distress, that they will be hauled out of poverty. That's spine-tingling stuff; a realisation of the hope they barely dared to dream. And for those who are mighty, powerful, rich – do they get goosebumps when they hear God's message that they will be brought down, torn from thrones, wealth redistributed?

It's dangerous stuff this message. And it is entrusted to a child. One who barely knows God. Who is not a seasoned faithful follower, but brand new to this. Will he be listened to?

The word of the Lord was rare, is still rare, but that lamp of God has not yet gone out, and the message given to those brave enough to speak it is one which makes ears tingle. A message spoken to the abomination of our times, bearing witness to that which is unbearable.

Are we like Eli, denying that there is light and hope? Eli, who had become so fatigued he was anaesthetised to the sufferings around him, resigned to God's word being in short supply, believing in the inevitability of darkness? Or are we like Samuel, open to new possibilities, aware that we don't really know God, but prepared to share God's radical message even through our tears? To listen to that rarest of beliefs – that there is light and there is hope for those in despair. Amen

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