

Sermon 17 January 2021 (Loughrigg Team)

At first sight there may appear little connection between our two Bible readings today but there may perhaps be one interesting parallel.

Spiritually speaking, things were at a low ebb at the beginning of the 1st book of Samuel. As we heard earlier the word of Lord was rare in those days. The resident priest at Shiloh, Eli, was old with failing eyesight, his two sons, also priests, were a thoroughly bad lot, the Bible describes them variously as wicked or scoundrels. The two rays of light in the situation were the young Samuel and his mother Hannah. Hannah, married to Elkanah, had previously been childless and was very unhappy about it. One day she prayed earnestly to God for a male child which if granted she would then give into God's service. She duly fell pregnant by Elkanah and Samuel was born. Once weaned, Hannah did indeed leave him with Eli the priest to be brought up serving God. In doing so she was fulfilling her promise but actually handing over your first and only child can't have been easy at all. What happened next, however, was really quite remarkable: she broke forth into a song of praise to God which, when we read it now, immediately brings to mind Mary's Magnificat in Luke's Gospel. Hannah begins "My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God." It's stirring stuff.

Next we have the very familiar story of God's repeated call to Samuel during the night. Samuel didn't understand what was going on, Eli, despite his failing faculties did recognise that it was God calling, at least after the third time, and explained this to the young boy telling him how to respond. Then, during the rest of that night and the following morning, Samuel learnt a lesson that would stay with him for the rest of his life and it was one which has implications for us too – it was this, first listen to God then act on what you've heard. For a budding prophet this would probably equate to "first listen to God, then speak yourself". Not always straightforward; in this particular case God's message was very critical of Eli and must be delivered to him in person, which, after some persuasion from Eli, Samuel did. But to his credit Eli did accept it. Now I said there were implications for ourselves in all this and that's true whether we're would-be prophets or just ordinary Christians. For us, the listening to God part might involve being still, praying, reading the Bible, hearing a sermon, meditating while walking in the woods and so forth. And then acting on what we've heard might mean sharing it with a trusted friend, making a decision and feeling at peace about it, changing our behaviour in some way perhaps. The key principle here is about involving God in one's life, or perhaps more accurately, allowing God to involve us in his purposes. The whole issue about how God speaks today, for example in this pandemic, is an important one and well worth wrestling with.

Turning to our New Testament reading, Jesus is now in Galilee and calls Philip, a native of Bethsaida, to follow him. He in turn tries to enlist his friend Nathaniel from Cana. Now in those days there was often quite strong rivalry between different towns hence Nathaniel's disparaging comment about the fact that Jesus came from Nazareth. Alright, says Philip, but "Come and see". I said at the beginning of this sermon that I thought there might be a parallel between our two passages today. If the message to Samuel was "First listen to God, then speak yourself", then Philip's message to Nathaniel was "First meet Jesus, then make up your mind about him" - rather than relying on hearsay or traditional prejudice. It's a good point.

“Come and see” Philip had said. What does that mean today? How do we invite people to come and meet Jesus now? One way is through personal testimony. This was something very close to the heart of John the Evangelist’s whose passionate desire was that his readers would become Christians. He begins his first epistle with these words “We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life.” He’s talking about Jesus of course.

In this context the theologian William Barclay tells the story of a weekend country house party back in the 19th century when one of the guests was a well-known agnostic Thomas Huxley, whose grandsons include Aldous, Julian and Andrew Huxley. Sunday morning came at the party and several people prepared to set off for church but predictably not Huxley. Instead he approached another guest, a man known to have a straightforward and personal Christian faith, asking him to miss church and stay and explain what he believed and what it meant to him. But, said the man, you’re far cleverer than I am, you’ll simply demolish everything I say. No I won’t, said Huxley, please stay and talk. Which the man did and afterwards Huxley was quite emotional and told him I would give my right hand to believe as you do. I don’t think that Huxley was ever converted but that conversation was obviously a significant moment. May it encourage us in being prepared to share our testimony.

Back to Nathaniel. He did come to meet Jesus and even as he was approaching Jesus affirmed him very warmly demonstrating his ability to read the human heart even at a distance, even under a fig tree. People in that culture were fond of their fig trees, which provided shade and a quiet place to think and relax. Nathaniel was very impressed and came to faith at that moment. Nathaniel, says Jesus, I can do more than read your heart. I can be for you and for all people the way, the ladder that leads to heaven.

Let me conclude. If, once the Covid restrictions have been lifted, you find yourself at a country house party or perhaps just in your garden chatting to a neighbour over the fence and the opportunity comes up to speak about your faith, say a quick prayer and then tell your story. The Bible says that a great cloud of witnesses, including Philip and Nathaniel, Samuel and his mum, will be urging you on.

Amen