

## Listening to God by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> July 2021 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Reading: 1 Samuel 3:1-10, 20-21 (GNB)

In those days, when the boy Samuel was serving the LORD under the direction of Eli, there were very few messages from the LORD, and visions from him were quite rare. <sup>2</sup> One night Eli, who was now almost blind, was sleeping in his own room; <sup>3</sup> Samuel was sleeping in the sanctuary, where the sacred Covenant Box was. Before dawn, while the lamp was still burning, <sup>4</sup> the LORD called Samuel. He answered, "Yes, sir!" <sup>5</sup> and ran to Eli and said, "You called me, and here I am."

But Eli answered, "I didn't call you; go back to bed." So Samuel went back to bed.

<sup>6-7</sup> The LORD called Samuel again. The boy did not know that it was the LORD, because the LORD had never spoken to him before. So he got up, went to Eli, and said, "You called me, and here I am."

But Eli answered, "My son, I didn't call you; go back to bed."

<sup>8</sup> The LORD called Samuel a third time; he got up, went to Eli, and said, "You called me, and here I am."

Then Eli realized that it was the LORD who was calling the boy, <sup>9</sup> so he said to him, "Go back to bed; and if he calls you again, say, 'Speak, LORD, your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went back to bed.

<sup>10</sup> The LORD came and stood there, and called as he had before, "Samuel! Samuel!"

Samuel answered, "Speak; your servant is listening."

<sup>19</sup> As Samuel grew up, the LORD was with him and made come true everything that Samuel said. <sup>20</sup> So all the people of Israel, from one end of the country to the other, knew that Samuel was indeed a prophet of the LORD.

## **Favourite Bible passages**

Today at St Michael's we celebrate Bible Sunday – not at the time that is set in the lectionary or the Book of Common Prayer, but at the end of the school year, because we take this opportunity to give our children who are moving from Year 2 to Year 3 a Bible. This is a good age (about 8 years old) for them to be reading the actual Bible for themselves, not a children's bible story book.

Over the past few weeks I asked members of our church to share their favourite Bible passages with me. There were lots of interesting contributions. Here's one from one of our teenagers:

Ecclesiastes 3:1 "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven." It reminds me to take a step back and that God has a plan and with every bad day there will be a good day. It reminds me that everything has a place and a time.

One of our children chose the story of Jacob and Esau "because it's interesting" – a very valid reason. There are lots of extremely interesting passages in the Bible, and the story of the conflict between these two brothers has lots of resonances for any of us who have found it difficult to get on with other family members.

Many of the choices were of verses that gave encouragement in hard times. Three people chose Psalm 121:

I lift up my eyes to the hills.

From where does my help come?

<sup>2</sup> My help comes from the LORD,  
who made heaven and earth.

## Listening to God

My topic today is “Listening to God”, and particularly listening to God through the Bible. The Bible is often described as “the Word of God”, and Christians believe that it is one of the most important ways that God speaks to us.

Jesus ended his parable of the Sower with the words “Listen, then, if you have ears!” (Mark 4:9, GNB). The story is about seed, which represents the word of God, falling into different places, which represent different people and how they respond. Some (those on the path) don’t even get started. Others (those on rocky ground) have an immediate enthusiasm, but have no roots and so give up when the going gets tough. Others (the thorny ground) have their minds so full of the worries and pleasures of life that they don’t make time to listen to God. And yet others (the good soil) bear fruit. The moral of the story is that if you want your life to be fruitful from God’s point of view, you need to give time and attention to God’s word. Do you read your Bible? If not, how do you expect to grow in faith?

## God speaks to us

There are several ways that we can hear God speaking to us in the Bible. Some are *direct*, for example some commands such as “Love God with all your heart” and “Love your neighbour as yourself”. But there are also *indirect* ways, for example, when we read a piece of narrative, such as the story of the calling of Samuel in today’s Old Testament reading. Here we listen to God by reflecting on the story and the way it has been written. In thinking about the characters in the story, we think about how they behaved in

relation to others and God; whether the story contains a good example to follow, or a bad example to avoid. We can ask ourselves, what would this passage have meant to the people who first heard or read it, and what would it mean for us today?

When we want to hear God speaking to us in the Bible it is important to ask the Holy Spirit to guide our thinking as we read and reflect on the passage. And we need to give time for this. We are more likely to get something from the passage if we read it more than once, and notice what strikes us, what questions it raises for us.

But how can we make sure we're not getting the wrong message, or that we are misinterpreting the Bible? One important thing to do is to check against other teaching in the Bible, and so the more familiar we become with the Bible the easier this will be. We can also use written resources (commentaries, bible study notes) and ask other Christians what they think. There's great value in studying the Bible with others, for example in a house group, where we can hear other people's insights and test our own against them.

### **The calling of Samuel**

Let's try this out by taking the story of the boy Samuel hearing God speaking to him. Read it again for yourself, and ask yourself, what do you notice? Does any particular word or phrase stand out to you? Was there anything surprising about what happened? Are there any lessons for us to take away? Does the story challenge our assumptions, or give us

any encouragement? What do you think God might want to say to you through this story?

There are 3 points I gained from listening to the story of Samuel:

- God can speak to people of any age and use them as his agents; children can be agents of God just as much as adults. (Check: Jesus' words about children in Matthew 18:1-4). As we seek to be more inter-generational in the way we operate as a church, we need to let the voices of children and young people be heard. God spoke to the aged priest Eli through the young Samuel.
- But it is also true that Samuel needed help to tune in to God; as verse 7 tells us "Samuel did not yet know the LORD" (ESV translation). Eli's experience and knowledge helped Samuel to develop a relationship with God. This is particularly relevant for parents and those working with children and young people, and for the church as a whole: we have a responsibility to help children and young people to grow in faith and know God for themselves.
- My last point comes from the words that Eli taught Samuel to say: "Speak, Lord; your servant is listening" (verse 9). If we want God to speak to us, then we have to be *listening* – that means being open to God and ready to hear whatever he wants to say to us, even if it is uncomfortable. In fact, the message that God gave Samuel was so scary that Samuel didn't want to tell Eli, and Eli had to coax it out of him. Are we ready for God to challenge us as well as comfort us?

## **Prayer** (the Collect for Bible Sunday)

Blessed Lord,  
who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning:  
help us so to hear them,  
to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them,  
that, through patience, and the comfort of your holy word,  
we may embrace and for ever hold fast the hope of  
everlasting life,  
which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ,  
who is alive and reigns with you,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever. Amen.