

2nd Sunday after Epiphany 15th January 2012

1 Samuel 3.1-10, John 1.43-51

The story of the call of Samuel is one we hear often, and it is a favourite Sunday school story I suspect because it is about a child. It is set in a context that we haven't heard and don't read often in Church and we don't really hear what the call is to because that is also left out of most lectionaries - I suspect because leaving out these bits suggest that it has a more general application. Today I want to tease out its very specific application within the book of Samuel.

The early chapters of Samuel mark a transition in the history of Israel from a kind of theocracy to a monarchy. From the time that the Israelites crossed the Jordan they have been ruled by charismatic figures called Judges who God raises up at various crisis points. The Book of Judges describes some cycles that the people went through over some centuries. When they were faithful to God everything went well. The next generation was not faithful to God but went after other gods. God left them to their own devices and generally they became oppressed by the nations around about. When they cried out to God in their distress he raised up a leader and saved them and that generation then came to serve faithfully. Their children turned away... You can almost see this in our own time.

When Samuel is called things are on the downer in Israel. In fact the abuses are strong right at the heart of the national worship centre at Shiloh where Samuel lives with the High Priest Eli. Eli's sons are also priests because priesthood is hereditary. They are abusing the sacrificial system and turning it into something to line their own pockets and meet their own sexual desires. Eli has done nothing about it despite the issues being brought to his attention. As our story begins we are told that Samuel is a boy serving the Lord under Eli and words from God to the people have become rare; few people were having visions. It is not surprising therefore that God has to call three times before Eli the High Priest starts to recognise that Samuel is being called. It is to his credit that he gives Samuel the right advice - *say speak Lord for your servant is listening.*

I suspect that Samuel did not hear a voice that was external but heard a voice 'in his head'. What he hears when he does say to God *speak for your servant is listening* is judgement on Eli's family because Eli's sons were blaspheming through their abusive practices and Eli did nothing to restrain him. The call is

God awakening a ministry of prophecy in Samuel's heart. Prophets are God's Advocates about social justice. The truth of the call to this very difficult ministry is affirmed when Eli very solemnly and rightly puts Samuel in a position where he has to say what he has heard. Samuel keeps nothing back and Eli says, '*It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him.*' The chapter ends with a general statement that from this time on as Samuel grows up the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground.

Samuel's work as a prophet is a ministry of advocacy for social justice. We see prophets like this today on a global scale and they are often people who suffer a great deal. Some of the great Jewish prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel suffer a great deal. John te Baptist is executed. Jesus is prophet but also priest and king and Son of God, so much more than a prophet and he too is killed. We have I think modern prophets on a similar scale to these. They differ from advocates of social justice who come from a political stance in that while what they say sounds political it is not ideologically political - e.g. socialist or conservative or Marxist. What they say stems from a relationship and openness to God, a staying in the presence of God to hear what is saying about an issue. I quoted Desmond Tutu recently saying that everything he says stems from his study of the scriptures and prayer. These people I acknowledge are giants. We can look at them and think how could they? Each of them would probably reply that they were under a kind of inner compulsion. They would as it were burn inside if they said nothing. They have a deep passion for justice, for God and deep love of human beings and creation. They also have a big even universal perspective - God and the nation, or God and the world.

For every giant like these there are countless others who do the same thing on a much smaller scale. These are people who have looked at the giants and the courage they show and say *I can do my bit where I am*. They advocate for local town issues or for a specific group of people, like refugees, minority groups, indigenous health or land rights, those who have been abused or who have a particular disease or physical or mental handicap. They advocate for carers. Some advocate on behalf of others; others ask what they can do with their skills or set out to learn skills so they can help in practical ways. Sometimes the issue is technological - with our rising populations we need technical solutions to a whole range of challenges that face us - how to find new sources of metal, how to maintain good water supplies in times of rising population and lower rainfall,

how to provide for the increasing number of people who want to see the world's beauty spots here in WA without damaging the environment.

An American writer called Fred Buechner produced a definition of vocation which I like a lot. He says *the vocation for you is the one in which your deep gladness and the world's deep need meet -- something that not only makes you happy but that the world needs to have done*. By deep gladness I understand something like fulfilment or the satisfaction replacing a deep aching internal pain because you have done all that you could to resolve a need. By deep gladness I also understand a sense of direction for life which is usually beyond realising material goals such as particular furniture or a substantial income. There is a spiritual dimension, a desire to help or serve.

In our context there are plenty of causes out there in our society and I know many of you are involved either directly through your paid work or as volunteers. What I want to do is to raise in your mind that at least some of what **you** do is in response to a call which you may be aware of or may not yet be aware of as a call from God. This kind of involvement fits in well with the diocesan mission plan categories and with the fivefold Anglican mission statement. It is important for us to recognise what is being done as well as look for ways to become involved. As we approach our mission planning days with the mission team I ask you to think about the questions in the form I sent out with the newsletter, and look at the questions on the inside cover of today's service book - do take the book away and think about them. They are designed to tap into those aches or desires or nagging thoughts which we all have in some way or another. Please also answer the questions for yourself and send the answers in. If you can do that by next week the planning team can take them all into account when we meet.