



Sunday 14 January 2018 – Epiphany 2
Sermon for 10.00am Eucharist at St Andrew's Parish Church Guernsey
Readings: 1 Samuel 3: 1-14 & St John 1: 43-end
Given by the Rev'd Juliette Robilliard

The Old Testament lesson featured the familiar account of the young boy Samuel who, in the stillness of the night, is asleep in the temple. The day job is serving Eli, the elderly Priest, whose vision has failed.

I wonder what is your impression of this account? Charming? Heart-warming? Or faintly unsettling? If we look closely it is an account of a young boy's lonely childhood apparently ring-fenced from friends of his own age, in his dutiful service to the old priest. And, what an odd home in which to live. The John Lewis Christmas TV Advert of the child losing sleep over the benign, imaginary, under-bed monster, is nothing compared with the eeriness of the temple. The smell of the day's animal sacrifice still pervading the air and the mysterious presence of the Ark of the Covenant screened from view. And yet right in the heart of the temple complex is Samuel: but what really is his purpose in being there?

The story, and Tim [Rector] this is for the two of us, it is a chilling reminder to every priest that we have a particular responsibility to our calling to minister faithfully and preach 'in season and out of season' and not take the easy option of massaging the message because otherwise, it might possibly hurt. Let me explain.

We are told that the word of the Lord was rare in those days: rare but not absent. Eli has served as priest in the temple for decades. Doubtless the ritual was so familiar to him that despite his loss of vision he was able to operate without much conscious thought. We are also told that Eli's two sons, have failed in their calling as priests. So, what has gone wrong?

Had we read the previous chapter of Samuel, we would have learned that God had made Eli well aware of his spiritual failings and those of his sons. In addition, Eli is even given a warning from God, through the lips of an unknown prophet, "Those who honour me I will honour, and those who **despise** me shall be treated with contempt." But he chose to ignore the warning. Now, in today's reading, it seems that Eli is not only slumbering physically but he is slumbering spiritually; his failed vision perhaps illustrative of a closed mind. Eli, in failing to instruct his own sons sufficiently of the need to have a living relationship with God, has also failed Samuel too. Samuel has no recognition of God's presence in the temple which, after all, is the place of most sacred space where God is manifest and at work. Eli has also failed to teach Samuel that God calls each one of us individually to serve him.

In the face of Eli's worst efforts small wonder then that when God calls, Samuel has no expectation that the voice he hears could be any other than Eli's. Mercifully, at the 11th hour, a glimmer of spiritual perception dawns on Eli who recognises that God is engaging directly with the child Samuel who, in his innocence, is untainted by spiritual inertia. Once more, God out of love and compassion for the people with whom he has made a covenant, sets out to rescue Israel from spiritual oblivion.

But the first message that God requires Samuel to deliver is brutally frank. It requires Samuel to be unswerving in telling the truth to the elderly Priest who has to all intents and purposes become his surrogate parent. It is a significant test of Samuel's ability to be loyal to

God despite the spiritual apathy of others. Later in the Bible account we know that Samuel chose to be faithful.

Today, the temple is long gone: redundant since the incarnation of God's son. No longer need we make physical sacrifices to atone for our failings. Jesus Christ has given us the means of salvation. So how should we be serving him in gratitude for such wonderful grace and love? The Gospel gives us all the instruction we need. Philip in recognising Jesus as the Messiah goes to find his friend Nathanael to share the wonderful Gospel News "We've found him!" Only to be met with Nathanael's utterly contemptuous remark "Can anything good come out of Nazareth!" But Philip perseveres faithfully, "Come and see." And, that too, is our task, to persevere faithfully pointing people to Christ, through our every thought and word and deed. To do that we need to be in regular communication with Christ to support us from wavering. That needs more than our communal hour of Sunday worship but living daily life prayerfully to be open and receptive to God's direction for our lives and, our Church.

A final thought; can we, like Samuel, say without reservation:

"Master speak for your servant is listening."

Amen.