

Homily for people and parishes...

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday 2nd June, Pentecost 2

Readings: **1Samuel 3:1-10 (11-20)**

Psalm 139: 1-6, 13-18

2Corinthians 4:5-12

Mark 2:23 – 3:6

Last week I caught up with a friend who has a sense that God may be calling her away from her current context to a new season of ministry somewhere else. She has asked some friends to pray with her to help discern where next... and it was good to pray together. It would be helpful if God sent an email message or a text when we're trying to make this sort of decision, or even an angel with a flaming sword... but, generally this is not how things happen!

In today's Old Testament reading we hear about a young boy called Samuel who was trying to discern God's direction and he was assisted in this by an old priest called Eli. Most of us would remember that Samuel's mother, Hannah, had been desperate to have a child and had made a deal with God. If she was granted a child, then she would give her first born to serve God and this happened. So, from a very early age Samuel had lived a religious life, mentored by Eli.

One night, while Samuel was sleeping, he heard a voice calling his name. Not surprisingly he thought it was Eli calling him, so he went and woke the priest to see what he wanted. This happened three times before Eli recognised that the voice Samuel was hearing may have been the voice of God. So, he directed Samuel, that if he heard the voice a fourth time to respond, "Speak Lord, your servant is listening!" Samuel heard the voice a fourth time and did as Eli had directed him, and God shared with Samuel what he planned to do.

As we consider this encounter between Samuel and God we might be tempted to dismiss it as something that God only did a long time ago, or as something that God does only for special people. After all, when we read through the Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament, we clearly find that God spoke to some people, but, not everybody. He spoke to the anointed few like Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah.. but, not the crowd. In today's reading it was Samuel but this would not have surprised anybody since it was known that he was an answer to his mother's prayer, & had been set aside to work for God in the Temple.

In our time we may be tempted to think that God still only speaks to special people. People like Mother Theresa, Billy Graham, or the religious teachers and spiritual writers who have encouraged us in our journeys of faith. Because we do not wake up in the night hearing God calling to us in an audible voice, we might be tempted to think that God still speaks to some people, but not everybody, and... maybe not us!

If we do think that God only speaks with special people it is helpful to remember the coming of God's Spirit at Pentecost which we celebrated two weeks ago. In that experience the Holy Spirit came upon ALL the believers – not just Peter or Mary! Similarly, throughout the Book of Acts we read about the experience of God's Spirit coming upon people who believed BEFORE they were baptised; upon others AFTER they were baptised; in the lives of those who were JEWISH, and in the lives of those who were NOT JEWISH.

The New Testament witness is that God's blessing and empowering is for all who believe... from those few first Century followers of Christ to the many millions of our time.

Maybe Samuel's prayer could be our prayer this week! In our personal times of prayer, and when we are together in congregations could we pray, "Speak Lord, your servant is listening?" When we sit at home, work in the yard, or walk along the road... could we develop within us the expectation that God will speak to us?

It may be through a dream, or a voice in the night, like Samuel. But, it may also be through a verse or a word from a bible reading; through conversation with a friend; through the sound of wind blowing in gum trees; through the words of an email, a poem, a song, or a radio program... In many ways the response of Samuel is a great way to begin and end each day because it reminds us to be open and ready. When we wake, and when we go to bed, can we pray, "Speak Lord your servant is listening?"

I am a little uncomfortable as I affirm this because often my prayers could begin, "Listen Lord, your servant is speaking!" Maybe that is true for many of us? Imagine if in our intercessions this morning we paused after we'd finished and invited God's Spirit to speak to us in some minutes of silence... knowing, in the deepest part of our being, that there is something we need to hear.

But, listening to God can be a risky thing – maybe, that's part of the reason we're good at talking, and not so good at listening! For when we listen, we may discern that God is asking of us something that is not easy. Maybe God will ask us to make a decision that other people will not agree with; maybe God will ask us to challenge a decision that will put us at odds with people we like. Maybe God will ask us to be more generous; less busy; and more caring...

When God spoke to the boy, Samuel – he explained that there were going to be terrible consequences for Eli and his family, because Eli's sons had repeatedly made poor choices. Samuel did not get back to sleep that night, and not surprisingly he was afraid to tell Eli what he had heard. But, the old priest wisely encouraged Samuel to share everything, and Samuel had the courage to be honest.

In our prayers we usually name a great number of things that need fixing in our world. People and places that are suffering because of illness or disease. Conflict in far-away countries like Ukraine and Gaza; and the growing number in our community who are homeless.

It is right to remember the need for justice and healing where it is needed most, and that we pray for these things seeking God's blessing. But, I think it is equally right for us to offer the prayer of Samuel, 'Speak Lord, your servant is listening', recognising that we each have a role to play in making the world a better place.

Much to take into prayer I reckon!
Would you please join me as I close in prayer now:

Loving, liberating, and life-giving God, we give thanks for the gift of your Spirit in our lives; the renewal of your Spirit in the life of the Church; and the work of your Spirit in the world. Help us to listen to the guidance of your Spirit and give us the courage to follow where your leading. We pray in the name of the one who said, 'I will send you a helper', Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.