

Hearing Voices

1 Samuel 3:1-20

Revelation 5:1-10

John 1:43-51

The key questions for both Samuel and Eli was, who was speaking? And how did they now it was God? The key question for us, three thousand years later, is how do we know when God is speaking to us? Let me suggest five things we need to do.

First, we need to expect God to speak to us. I don't necessarily mean that in a Joan of Arc-kind-of-way we will hear exact words from God – although that might happen for some people. But we need to expect that God will speak to us through events, through apparent coincidences, through our hearts and emotions. We need to believe that God has not abandoned us – because if we think he has then we will never hear his voice. That was one of the problems of Samuel's time. The people were spiritually low ebb and no one really expected to hear God speak or indeed see him:

The word of the Lord was rare in those days;
visions were not widespread.

1 Sam 3:1

So each one of us has to ask ourselves a question: do we expect to hear God? And do we live each moment as if we expect to hear from him, meet him? Do you expect to hear him in the words I speak now? Do you expect to meet him the person sitting next to you? Or the person you will pass on the street in the way home?

Second we need to know Jesus. And here, of course, I skip well beyond Samuel to the Book of Revelation. The bizarre imagery can be distracting but the passage heard today is essentially a fairly simple picture: there is a scroll; scrolls need to be unrolled and read; but there is no one who can do this, no one who can reveal its secrets – and this is a cause of great sorrow. But then someone is found and the someone is the Lamb of God – Jesus. It is Jesus who makes sense of the scriptures and Jesus who makes sense of our lives. Christians would argue that none of the Old Testament makes any real sense without a knowledge of Jesus. It is also, of course, Jesus who is revealed in the scriptures. But there is more to knowing Jesus than knowing about him from the scriptures. Each one of us needs to know him

personally. And one of the ways to do that is in reflection; and reflection requires stillness and time. It is enormously tempting to rush through life doing lots of things, meeting lots of people. There is nothing wrong in all that. But if we never reflect we will never make the most of our experiences. Most seriously of all we will never find the space to discern where God is speaking to us. Perhaps it is significant that Samuel heard the voice of the Lord when he was lying down, still, in the quiet of his own room. I spoke to a woman last week who had come to an important decision when she was ill. I am sure it was not by chance that she did that while she was ill – most her life was so busy that she never had time to think, reflect, listen to God. That was the upside of her illness. Perhaps it is better not to wait until we are ill to listen to God.

Third we need to know the scriptures. It would seem that Samuel knew neither God nor the scriptures:

Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord and the word of the Lord
had not yet been revealed to him.

1 Sam 3:7

We need to know the scriptures, not in a learning-by-rote kind of way, but to know the stories of God, the people of God and above to know about Jesus. Of course the learning by rote has a place: I was delighted at Big Jims last week when I told the children that we were going to learn about Moses and one of the children rattled off the whole life of Moses in less than a minute. But that is only the beginning. What matters is knowing why the story of Moses, or any other biblical character for that matter, is important to me and you in 2018.

Fourth we need to know that the voice of God is not the same as the voice of the world. That is very hard for me. I am a hard facts man. I value secular knowledge. But I also know that secular, scientific knowledge is not the whole story. As St Paul puts it

God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom,
and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

1 Corinthians 1:25

Isaiah put it like this:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts

Isaiah 55:10

I have just begun reading a fascinating book on the theology of Dementia.* The author, John Swinton, suggests that we need to make a conscious effort to see the world as God sees it and not as human knowledge sees it. So, for example, we have allowed the medical profession to define people with dementia by their symptoms, by what they have lost, their memories, their powers of reasoning, as being in effect 'deprived of their minds' – for this is the literal meaning of the word 'dementia'.

Swinton does not claim that the medical experts are wrong in their analysis of dementia. What he does say is that the medical way of looking at a person with dementia is not the whole story. What is more we, as Christians, should not begin with a medical definition, the things such a person can no longer do; we should begin with who they are in the sight of God. And this is given to us by the psalm we read a few minutes ago

You yourself created my inmost parts;
You knit me together in my mother's womb

Psalm 139:12

If God knew me before I was born, it is not possible that he ceases to know me simply because I have lost many of the mental faculties I used to take for granted,

In Michael Ignatieff's semi autobiographical novel, *Scar Tissue*, a woman with dementia and two sons. One son was a philosopher; he had no scientific or medical knowledge but he knew that his mother needed him and so he visited regularly. The other son was a doctor and had a good medical understanding of his mother's condition and was very active in organizing her care package. But he never visited her personally. We might well ask which son had the better understanding of who the mother was.

John Swinton also quotes from a woman whose husband suffered from Alzheimer's. She asked,

How do you really know his mind has gone? You don't really now for sure, do you? How do I know that the poor man isn't hidden somewhere, behind all that confusion, trying to reach out and say, 'I love you, Sara'?

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We must not let the voice of God be limited by hard facts, secular thinking.

And finally we need others to help us discern what God is saying.

We can read books to learn other people's perspectives. We need friends at an informal level; perhaps someone we talk to by appointment, sometimes called a spiritual director: Samuel had Eli, an older and wiser person; Nathaniel had Philip; I have regular meetings with a number of people. I know I cannot do it on my own. And of course, it is part of my ministry, both in the parish and across the Diocese, to help others hear what God is saying to them.

The proof of the pudding is, in a sense, in the eating. Samuel grew up to be the foremost prophet in Israel, the man who anointed kings and then dismissed them. Philip brought Nathaniel to faith; both are remembered as apostles. The likelihood of anyone of us being remembered in the history books is small. But we will be remembered by some for what God has done through us. And it will be because we have listened to God and acted on what we have heard.

N Clews
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* *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God* by John Swinton