

Cotton End Baptist Church:

Lessons for Today - Samuel

This afternoon, Becky and I will be in the congregation at St Paul's Church for the recording of Songs of Praise; to be broadcast on Sunday 20th February, so keeping the teaching this morning.

As we begin to draw our series on Old Testament, as said in the introduction we are looking at the great Biblical leader, Samuel.

Some Verses from Samuel

I Samuel 3

The boy Samuel was serving GOD under Eli's direction. This was at a time when the revelation of GOD was rarely heard or seen. One night Eli was sound asleep (his eyesight was very bad—he could hardly see). It was well before dawn; the sanctuary lamp was still burning. Samuel was still in bed in the Temple of GOD, where the Chest of God rested.

⁴⁻⁵ Then GOD called out, "Samuel, Samuel!"

Samuel answered, "Yes? I'm here." Then he ran to Eli saying, "I heard you call. Here I am."

Eli said, "I didn't call you. Go back to bed." And so he did.

⁶⁻⁷ GOD called again, "Samuel, Samuel!"

Samuel got up and went to Eli, "I heard you call. Here I am."

Again Eli said, "Son, I didn't call you. Go back to bed." (This all happened before Samuel knew GOD for himself. It was before the revelation of GOD had been given to him personally.)

⁸⁻⁹ GOD called again, "Samuel!"—the third time! Yet again Samuel got up and went to Eli, "Yes? I heard you call me. Here I am."

That's when it dawned on Eli that GOD was calling the boy. So Eli directed Samuel, "Go back and lie down. If the voice calls again, say, 'Speak, GOD. I'm your servant, ready to listen.'" Samuel returned to his bed.

¹⁰ Then GOD came and stood before him exactly as before, calling out, "Samuel! Samuel!"

Samuel answered, "Speak. I'm your servant, ready to listen."

¹¹⁻¹⁴ GOD said to Samuel, "Listen carefully. I'm getting ready to do something in Israel that is going to shake everyone up and get their attention. The time has come for me to bring down on Eli's family everything I warned him of, every last word of it. I'm letting him know that the time's up. I'm bringing judgment on his family for good. He knew what was going on, that his sons were desecrating God's name and God's place, and he did nothing to stop them. This is my sentence on the family of Eli: The evil of Eli's family can never be wiped out by sacrifice or offering."

¹⁵ Samuel stayed in bed until morning, then rose early and went about his duties, opening the doors of the sanctuary, but he dreaded having to tell the vision to Eli.

¹⁶ But then Eli summoned Samuel: "Samuel, my son!"

Samuel came running: "Yes? What can I do for you?"

¹⁷ "What did he say? Tell it to me, all of it. Don't suppress or soften one word, as God is your judge! I want it all, word for word as he said it to you."

¹⁸ So Samuel told him, word for word. He held back nothing.

Eli said, "He is GOD. Let him do whatever he thinks best."

¹⁹⁻²¹ Samuel grew up. GOD was with him, and Samuel's prophetic record was flawless. Everyone in Israel, from Dan in the north to Beersheba in the south, recognized that Samuel was the real thing—a true prophet of GOD. GOD continued to show up at Shiloh, revealed through his word to Samuel at Shiloh.

Let us pray – Heavenly....

Some jokes to lighten the mood:

How does a spoiled rich girl change a lightbulb?

She says, "Daddy, I want a new apartment."

How many FILM DIRECTORS does it take to change a light-bulb?

"I don't care how many it takes, what it costs, or how you do it -
JUST GET IT CHANGED, OKAY?!?! !"

How many PESSIMISTS does it take to change a light-bulb?

"What's the point? It'll only blow again."

How many TEENAGERS does it take to change a light-bulb?

"Do it yourself - it's your house! What am I, some kind of personal slave or something?"

How many BUS DRIVERS does it take to change a light-bulb?

You've got to be joking - they won't even change a five-pound note.

We cannot get away from it; our world and our culture are changing rapidly. With new technology and increasing global interaction, we face a world that is becoming radically different from the one in which we once lived. We live in the world of social networking, FACEBOOK, Twitter and Bebo. Our own society is changing, new agendas by the collation government including the Big Society. There are new ways of thinking and there are new ways of doing things – I heard this week from Chris Duffet, the incoming Vice President of the Baptist Union that he was having Trustees meeting on skype.

Change can be threatening. But times of change are often the best opportunities for us to hear God.

Frankly, I'm not sure what all of this means for the church. I think, though, that one of the greatest challenges we are facing as a church is figuring out just how we are to proclaim the Gospel in such a rapidly changing world.

With the Old Testament reading today, we hear the story of God's call to young Samuel and his commissioning as a prophet to Israel. This young man represents a turning point in

Israel's history, and he comes at a time when the winds of change and opportunity are blowing.

As we have heard over the last couple of weeks, the setting for this story is the period of the Judges. (The Judges were local tribal leaders whom God raised up to meet specific crises facing the people of God.)

Israel had been settled in her land for some 200 years by then. And the Israelites had brought with them great expectations, glorious promises, and hope for a bright future. When they entered the land of Canaan, they crafted altars and constructed sanctuaries. They began living as God's people in the new place. But the years passed by. They became comfortable. The fervor with which they celebrated their deliverance faded as they struggled to create a new life in their land.

The priests continued to worship and maintain the sanctuaries. They tried to keep Israel's spirituality alive. But the people could see little advantage in serving God. They became preoccupied with their own interests and their commitment to God waned and grew dim.

Gradually, the Israelites forgot that they were God's people. Sure, a few of the elders remembered the old days and tried to keep the worship of God alive. But the new generation would have none of it. They had abandoned God in pursuit of their own pleasure.

As the last verse in the book of Judges puts it: "Everyone did as they wanted to do." Both Geoff Colmer and Trevor Ogden in their own preaching has picked up on this.

Nevertheless, it is on this stage and with this backdrop that young Samuel enters Israel's history.

The beginning chapters of first Samuel tell us the story of Samuel's miraculous birth. The book begins with a barren woman who is desperate to have a child. Sound familiar? With nowhere else to go with her burden of grief and shame and pain, Hannah makes her way to the sanctuary at Shiloh to pray and cry out to her God for what she needs most in this world.

When Hannah prays for a child at Shiloh, she is praying for a future, for the possibility of something beyond the barren present. As we know from teaching, Children – to the

Israelites – were symbols of hope and newness, symbols of renewal and stability in an otherwise unstable world. Children were the promise and hope of tomorrow.

As we hear Hannah's story and listen to her desperate prayer to God, we realize that this is not just a story about Hannah's lack of a child. We realize that this story is about Israel. Israel has come to a crossroads. They have all but abandoned God and have gone their own way. Yet, without God, they have no future and no hope.

What does God do? God heard Hannah, and answered her prayer for a child, and that child grew.

She had promised to dedicate him to the Lord. And as soon as Samuel was old enough, she took him back to that same sanctuary at Shiloh and placed him in the service of God in Eli's care.

So now the stage's curtain has been drawn.

So to the verses I've just shared from The Message, we should note that there are indeed three characters in this story: the old priest Eli, the young man Samuel, and God. Too often we tend to focus on Samuel and forget about Eli.

If we listen carefully, though, we realize that Eli's role is quite significant.

Eli is an old man now, nearly blind. He has been priest at Shiloh almost his entire life. He inherited the position from his father, and he plans to continue that tradition and pass the priesthood on to his two sons.

But in the second chapter of this first letter of Samuel we are told that Eli's two sons are worthless and despise the things of the Lord. Eli does try hard to persuade them to change, but they simply do not listen. His sons embody the misdirected course of Israel.

At the beginning of our Old Testament reading from first Samuel chapter three, two significant details were mentioned that in fact serve as theological commentary.

First, the situation that ends the book of Judges is reflected: "The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not common." What a sad commentary on God's people. Could the same be suggested of the church today, I wonder?

As a small aside, this week I was listening to Melting Pot in the office. Melting Pot is the BBC

3CR's Sunday morning breakfast show. On this week's show, Ian who presents the show shared an article by Bishop Graham King, the Anglican Bishop of Sherborne in the Diocese of Salisbury who has launched 'Grill a Bishop' which is about encouraging young people to have an understanding of the Bible which is both true and relevant for daily lives. Bishop Graham was sharing that the real understanding of the Bible is lost on many today, particularly the young. Interesting thought.

Second, we are told that Eli's eyesight is failing him. In his day and time, blindness was often a metaphor for lack of spiritual insight.

Here is where we must slow down and begin hearing this story with fresh ears. We need to begin to hear this in a bigger, and deeper way. This is not just a nice story for Stepping Stone about a boy who has a spiritual experience.

Eli is representing Israel and the darkening path that she has taken in allowing the things of God to grow dim.

Yet, in this darkness, there is a glimmer of hope.

We are told that, "the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was."

It is no accident that this story takes place at night.

The darkness – like Eli's blindness – illustrates the Israelites' lack of spiritual vision and their absolute failure at living out their calling to be God's chosen people.

The lamp of God and the ark are both symbols of God's presence in the sanctuary. They are symbols of God's presence, symbols that remain, even in the darkness that the Israelite's spiritual blindness has led them into.

In the midst of the darkness of failing vision and amidst the pitch black night that is descending like a pall over Israel, the flame of God's presence is still burning.

God has not abandoned these people.

And in this darkness there lies Samuel, the miracle child. The child born to a barren woman. In dimness and confusion the future lies sleeping, just waiting for God's presence to awaken it!

We must be careful, though, not to overly romanticize Samuel, because the story is not about Samuel alone.

We all know that God called to him. Samuel heard God's voice, but yet he did not at first recognize the voice he heard as God's.

Samuel – after all – was only a youth and had not yet learned how to distinguish the voice of God from the voice of the surrounding culture. It is interesting, however, that even though the word of the Lord was rare in those days, it was a youth who heard it.

Listen again to the story-

“Samuel!”, the Voice calls out.

Bleary eyed, he gets up from his mat in the sanctuary and goes to Eli.

“Yes sir? What is it?”

Eli rolls over in his bed and sends him away. Twice more this happens.

The third time it dawns on Eli what is happening, and he explains to Samuel what he should do and how exactly he should respond.

Samuel returns to his mat and waits.

“Samuel!” the Voice calls. This time – because of Eli's insight – Samuel knows that the Voice is the voice of God.

And this time he knows how to respond, “Speak Lord”, says Samuel, “for you servant is listening.”

The message God goes on to give Samuel is a message of change, a message about the end of the old way of doing things. God tells Samuel that Eli's sons will no longer be allowed to lead Israel. Eli's priestly family will be removed and replaced.

Samuel lies anxiously in bed dreading the morning light, and the questions that will come along with it.

Morning comes and just as he dreaded, Eli asks the dejected Samuel what God said in the night and presses him -- threatens him even -- to tell all.

Finally Samuel tells Eli of his sons' miserable fate.

We might have expected Eli to become angry at hearing of the end that is coming for his family. We might even have expected Eli to deny that Samuel ever heard God at all.

But Eli's response is unexpected to us.

Because, I want to suggest we tend to focus on Samuel in this story, we may be surprised at Eli. After hearing the devastating news, Eli simply says, " After all, it is the LORD; let him do what he sees as good."

Eli still had enough faith that he could recognize God's work in the world. Even as the old ways pass on they still help convey truth.

Eli's spiritual eyes were dim, and he had not heard the word of the Lord in ages. He did not at first recognize God's work. But in the end, he recognized God. When young Samuel sought answers to his questions, Eli was there to guide him in the right direction. Even amidst all the turmoil and change taking place in the nation of Israel, a new leader was born.

A new leader was called by God to carry light to God's people.

But Samuel needed the guidance of blind old Eli to know how to respond. Even though the old ways were dying, they guided the new generation into its calling to be God's people.

Eli does not emerge as a hero in this story. At the end of his life, Eli fights no great battles, brings no new victories, leads no great building projects, becomes no great champion of justice, preaches no great sermons, builds no new altars. He has even failed to teach his sons the way of God.

We are so accustomed to looking for the hero of the story that we easily pass by Eli, and write him off as a pitiful old man with no purpose other than to get quickly out of the picture and let the new way come about.

And yet, Eli is the one.

It is Eli who gives young Samuel the tools he needs in order to be and bring the newness the people so desperately need. In Eli's quiet acceptance of the new word of God, we see a

gentleness and a piety, a commitment to God, that allows God to work far beyond blind old Eli.

Eli may not be a hero, but he succeeded in his role of enabling change.

He was the transition figure set between the past and the future, the cutting edge over which the old became new.

I firmly believe Eli served God well. Not as a hero, but as an ordinary person with all the frailties – and wisdom – that come with age. Eli had enough faith to guide a young boy who was seeking answers to questions about God.

We need more people like Eli.

People who are less concerned with being the hero, people who can guide the leaders of tomorrow. We need people who -- as the book of James puts it -- “show by the way they live their good life that their works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.”

We need more Elis.

And what of Samuel? Does he become the hero that Eli is not?

Perhaps.

After Samuel had been a prophet of God for many years, he had sons of his own. And his sons were worthless, just like Eli's. Samuel now, was being faced with the judgment of God on his own family.

Near the end of his life, Samuel's role came full circle back to Eli's role. Samuel was charged with facilitating the transition from the past, and so as an old man, he anointed young David as king and passed the torch of the future on.

When I think about this story I cannot help but think of the changes emerging in our society, our culture, and our church, both locally and nationally.

And the question that keeps nagging me is, how do we meet the challenges of that change? How do we remain faithful to our Christian heritage and yet still speak with meaning to and for our present culture?

How do we listen and see what God is doing, and how do we become more a part of it? How do we rekindle the flickering flame of God's presence in our lives, and fan it into the light that will be a light to the world?

Perhaps we need to realize that some things are indeed ending. Perhaps we have to recognize that some of what has been will not always continue to be.

We need to remember that the stability and power of our Faith is not dependent upon anything, other than the Living God's presence in our midst.

We can easily disrupt God's new work in the world if we desperately cling to what has always been. Now, everything need not change. But then, everything cannot remain the same.

Perhaps we are not all called to be Samuels. Instead, God is calling some of us to cast our lots with Eli and to show the Samuels how to seek the answers to their God-questions.

We too often overlook the crucial task of enabling others to hear God's voice for themselves. The 'we know it better than them' syndrome. I believe Angela last week spoke in her introduction sharing looking at within, using the Vicar puppet comparing him to Trevor.

And perhaps some of us young Samuels need to realize that we don't always know how to recognize the voice of God. The Eli's of our church have more to teach us than we might think. So who are they, here in Cotton End? We should never give up our yearning for the future. But in our zeal to move forward, let us not forget who taught us how to do so.

Let us not assume that we know the way on our own. Last Sunday morning, I was sharing in the Patronal Eucharist at St Paul's Church, Bedford where the preacher was the excellent Bishop of Pontrafract, Tony Robinson who was reflecting on the need to grow together in community, learning one from another. This, he argued was a Biblical principle that we often overlook.

I know that the greatest power that we the church have is God's presence in our midst.

God is present as the Elis of the church recognize the Voice. God is present as the Samuels of the church hear and respond.

It may take two generations – like the generations between Eli and Samuel, and Samuel and David – before we become the church of which we dream.

But if we only dream of the past we may not be able to see the Samuels of the day standing by our bedside asking for guidance. If we only dream of the future we may not have the opportunity to respond to the voice of God.

I'm no prophet but I do believe this: The new life that comes to the church will come because the Living God is present in our midst. New life will come to the church because we have recognized and heard the voice of God.

But hearing is not enough.

We must respond. 'Speak Lord because your servant is listening'

Whether we respond as Eli or as Samuel, each of us is a part of the new future that God is bringing.

There is a very clear risk of newness bringing an end to the security of the past. There is also the risk of rejection for announcing the newness that God is bringing. There is challenge. There is risk.

But one thing is certain, there will be no continuing on as usual. The rains that have already begun, the changes that are already in progress throughout our culture and church, will not allow us to keep on with the status quo. As a great preacher once said, "You and I will never know the potential God has given us until we step out in faith and take the risks we are called to take."

And if anyone comes to me having heard a Voice calling in the night, I will be ready to tell her – or him – to continue to listen for God's Voice and to respond... to say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

So to finish a collect which I love from Common Worship, the prayers of the England.

Let us make this prayer, our own today:

Almighty and everlasting God, increase in us your gift of faith that, forsaking what lies behind and reaching out to that which is before, we may run the way of your commandments and win the crown of everlasting joy; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.