

Sermon – Epiphany 2 Northleach

A slightly unusual start to this morning's sermon. I have three common bird songs to play to you....can you recognise them? Here's the first....

Each of those bird songs is incredibly common to our ears and most of us would be able to describe or recognise the birds in question. But recognising the birds from their voice alone is difficult...even though they are very familiar to us.

The same is true with human voices. Unless we train ourselves to pay very careful attention to individual voices, we don't always instantly recognise a voice, even one that is very familiar to us. And if we're not expecting to hear that person's voice in any case, if for instance we come across the person out of context, then we are even less likely to recognise them.

Apply this to the voice of God and the challenge is multiplied many times. We don't expect to hear the voice of God and so when we do, we mistake it for someone or something else.

This is the challenge that faced Samuel. In our reading this morning we heard:

“the Word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.”

In other words, the people had low expectations of God. They didn't expect God to act and so failed to notice when God did. Now if a teacher like Eli had low expectations; Samuel, his pupil, would have definitely low expectations too. Many of us are living proof that one can survive

teachers who had little faith or hope in you.

No wonder it took God three times to get through to Eli before the penny dropped and he realised that it was God trying to reach Samuel with his repeated calls, and not Samuel annoyingly shouting out night terrors.

If there has ever been a time in history akin to Samuel's day, then surely we are living through it now.

Even with the memory of Christmas still ringing in our ears, most would agree that the world is not a happy place for very many millions, billions even of people. Hope is in short supply.

And in our culture that is saturated with individualism presented daily by many in the media as the only source of truth; a culture where the desire to believe in only that which can be tested or proven by scientific means; in such a culture hope is excluded from the list of human possibilities - for hope depends upon us believing in a larger horizon than ourselves, a horizon that encompasses the unknown and the extraordinary and brings both within the parameters of human reason.

As Christians we believe that the world can be different, that our country can be different, that our community can be different, that our friends, families and ourselves, can be different. At the very foundation of our faith is a belief in change and improvement. Theologians call it repentance, which may or may not be a helpful term for you, but essentially it means making an intentional decision to change.

Like Samuel we live in an age when visions are not

widespread. An age when cynicism is so acceptable a mode of thought that it becomes the basis for most of the humour we watch on television.

Jesus lived in a similar age too: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth”, Nathaniel declares.

Once we institutionalise such thinking in our minds, then we can quickly turn quite bitter and hope drains swiftly away.

Restoring hope in God requires that we name the divine; it requires that we lay claim to those events in our lives that are of God and call them so.

God's calling upon our lives lies at the heart of both of our readings this morning. That God called Samuel, a child, reminds us to take our children seriously when they speak of God. When children talk about God it often makes us smile, yet often we leave it there, and fail to recognise the teaching it conveys too. If a child speaks to you of a spiritual experience, please accept it as described and not rationalise it away as childlike thoughts. We are less likely to do that with the insights of older people. Now here's a thought for you – perhaps the very young and the very old talk more readily about God because they have the following in common - they are literally closer to God both as the source and ultimate destination of life.

Once Eli understands that it is God trying to reach Samuel he gives the boy a very specific instruction: 'Go, lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening”.'

Jesus is equally directive of Philip: “Follow me” he says.

And Philip does just that. And having been found by Jesus, Philip rushes to tell others and coming to Nathaniel claims ownership of the Messianic discovery, declaring: “Look who we've found!”

The entire mission of the church is encapsulated in that single change of phrasing from “Jesus found Philip” to Philip declaring “We have found him”.

If your heart has ever burned with that sense of being touched by God, then you will sense something of the excitement and astonishment of Philip.

If you have journeyed from a place of cynicism or opposition to the church to a place of faith, then you will recognise the humility of Nathaniel.

If you have ever been worn down by the sad realities of life, despite trying to live faithfully under God, then you will understand something of the urgency of Eli's eventual response to Samuel.

If you have ever been startled by the realisation that God is taking an interest in you, then, whatever your age, you share something of the revelatory hope of Samuel.

These two readings are full of epiphany moments as Christ is recognised and embraced. Identify yours in your own life, whether drawn from many years ago or just this morning; and hold onto it with all your heart, not only because in these days visions are few, but because despite that, the Lord still speaks. And we need to learn to recognise God's song. Amen.