

Sermon, Jonathan Arnold, 14 January, 1 Samuel 3: 1-10

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A few years ago a very kind student whose parents had just bought an old Rectory in the Lake District, offered it to us for a summer holiday in exchange for looking after their two mad cats whilst they were away themselves. It was a beautiful place, just above Ullswater. One morning my wife Emma got up to look outside the window, whilst I was downstairs making tea, and she was confronted with the most remarkable sight. The whole of the lane outside the house was full of sheep, bleating and moaning as they were being shepherded to new pastures by border collie dogs. So that I could also experience this amazing sight, Emma shouted down to me, "Jonny, there are sheep in the road". My cry came back, "What do you want me to do about it?"

We have all had those moments when something we have said has been heard in a completely different way to how we intended it. In our age of unprecedented communication we are beginning to learn new ways of coping with the forms of miscommunication that it may bring. The old saying 'sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me' is no longer good enough in response to those who are trolled or cyber bullied. Email etiquette is forcing us to choose our words more carefully but also discern those messages which may come to us in the heat of the moment, forgive them and simply let them go through deletion. We are beginning, through social media, to listen to each other in new and often more forgiving ways. Not necessarily taking words at face value but trying to read between the lines to ensure that we hear another properly. We are learning once again to listen.

It is this task of learning to listen in new ways that lies behind our first reading this morning from the First Book of Samuel. The boy Samuel was living in an age when the word of the Lord was rarely heard, visions were not widespread. The latter phrase suggests that what the author of the book means by the 'word of the Lord' is not the mediated written word but more the direct voice of God as heard by Abraham and Moses in the burning bush. Such locutions had been delegated to the role of the king, however unreliable he may be. So the people of God in Samuel's time were not used to hearing the Lord speaking directly to them, and hence no longer expected to hear his word themselves.

Importantly, in the reading, the Lord wants Eli and Samuel to discover a new way of listening. God does not identify himself as the Lord to Samuel when he

calls to him, it is Eli who must do that. Neither does God give up, for he is persistent, through all the misunderstanding he waits until Eli can hear him in this new way. The stage has been set, the space has been opened, a new way of listening to God has now been made possible. It is now that Eli tells Samuel what to do and what to say: 'Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening"'.

However, the lectionary passage leaves out the climax of the story, for if we read on, we find that the words which the Lord has to say to Samuel are ones which will make 'both ears of anyone who hears it tingle' and especially the ears of Eli. Poor Samuel, can you imagine what it must have been like next morning to have to tell Eli what the Lord said to him?

'On that day I will fulfil against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I am about to punish his house for ever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God and he did not restrain them. Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering for ever'.

It is a hard message to speak and a hard message to hear. But Eli had already begun to listen, he had woken up and into this new forum of openness and he was able to hear the Lord's words, and accept them. Where before the voice of God was not expected to be heard now, because of Eli, there was free communication between the Lord and his people, there was a new relationship and expectation that the Lord would speak. The people who once did not hear, now listened and 'none of the Lord's words fell to the ground'.

At this time of open and free communication amongst all people with all its potential and pitfalls, the story of Samuel's call invites us to consider once again who we are listening to and how we are listening. Do we expect to hear the voice of God or is it drowned out by endless chatter? Do we listen to those who make the most noise, or can we hear those whose voices have been too often silenced? The story of Samuel also challenges all of us to reconsider the extent to which we speak. Do our words seek to build people up, and enable relationships based on mutual love, compassionate and reconciliation? In our world of words we are called once again into the silent presence of the Living Word, to kneel at his feet lost in wonder, love and praise. It is here and out of this wordless silence that we will learn once again to listen and to speak that the Word of the Lord may once again be heard in our lands. Amen.