Sermon for 2nd in Ordinary Year B

Readings: 1 Samuel 3:1-10; 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:43-51.

i

Perhaps we should forgive the old priest Eli for being so slow to realise it was the Lord who was calling the young boy, Samuel. After all, “in those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions” (1 Sam 3:1). It says it all when even a priest is shocked that God should actually speak to anyone. Yet this is a danger that has always faced people of faith, including Christian leaders today. When the faith burns low, it is so easy to accept that as being the norm; we adapt to life without God doing anything dramatic in our lives. So we may miss so much of what God is trying to say and do because we have stopped looking and listening.

Fortunately, the light of faith has never gone out entirely. In the holy shrine the ‘lamp of God had not yet gone out’ – that may have been true literally, as Eli and the boy went to bed at the end of the day, but it was also figuratively true. Just as Elijah heard in the hills of Horeb that there were “yet seven thousand in Israel whose knees have not bowed down to Baal” (1 Kings 19:18), despite Elijah feeling like he was the only one left: ‘I am the only one left,” said Elijah, “and now they are trying to kill me too” (1 Kings 19:14), so too the word of the Lord was rare in Eli’s day, but that did not mean it was silenced forever.

Thankfully, Samuel was able to clearly hear the voice of the Lord; he was still too young and naïve to have accepted the deadening adult assumption that God was noticeable only by his absence. Eli had lost the ability to hear God himself, but fortunately he was still able to conceive that God was talking to Samuel.

Let us thank God for all the Elis and Samuels down the ages who have been open to the prophetic word of God and for those whose wisdom has guided those who have heard. Those of us in the Methodist tradition rejoice still and benefit still from John and Charles Wesley recognising when God was saying and doing something new in their time and place.

ii

We are benefitting also from the fact that Nathanael and the other apostles were alive to the presence of God dawning upon them in a new way. I supposed they were predisposed to hearing the word of the Lord because they were men seeking that word – that is why Galilean fishermen like Andrew, Peter, James, John (Matthew 4:18-22) and Philip (John 1:44) had left the lake and were down by the Jordan as followers of the Baptist.

Philip seems to have recognised Jesus as the Messiah immediately in today’s passage. Perhaps it was because it was Philip who had been the other disciple with Andrew the day before who had followed Jesus at John the Baptist’s suggestion when the Baptist pointed at Jesus and said, Look, the Lamb of God” (John 1:35-36). Andrew and the other disciple, presumably Philip, had stayed with Jesus the rest of the day. Both Andrew and Philip reacted in the same way; having recognised the Messiah they immediately told their nearest and dearest. Andrew went to Peter and Philip fetched Nathanael.

Certainly, it appears that Jesus didn’t just happen upon Philip, but was looking for him before he set off for Galilee; in John 1:43 we read: “**Finding** Philip, he said to him, “Follow me.” That presupposes he was looking for him.

Before following Jesus to Galilee, Philip goes in search of Nathanael with his spectacular news, presumably as a follower of the Baptist the very news Nathanael had been hoping to hear – and yet his immediate response is rather cynical: “Nazareth! Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46).

Nathanael is deemed a ‘true Israelite’ by Jesus; he is loyal to God, devout, and apparently at peace with himself and the world as symbolised by his musing under the fig tree which is where Jesus first espied him.

Nathanael the true Israelite is the first believer to use the title, ‘Son of God’ of Jesus. John the Baptist had described Jesus as the ‘Lamb of God’; Andrew had told Peter he had found the ‘Messiah’ or the ‘Christ’; Philip had told Nathanael that he had found the prophet predicted to follow Moses in Deuteronomy 18:18; and Nathanael added the titles, ‘Son of God and King of Israel’. Thus John the Evangelist, the writer of this gospel account, has introduced the major titles that came to define what Christians would later claim for Jesus. At this stage of their journey all of the disciples, John the Baptist too, have much to learn about the true depth of truth in these descriptions, but the Evangelist has now placed them all before the reader and is ready to embark upon his Jesus story to recount what the true deeper significance of these titles is all about.

The first disciples have greater things than anything they have seen so far, says Jesus. They have much to learn. This new understanding which they must gain is symbolised in the phrase: ‘You shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man’ (John 1:51).

iii

Many Christians in the West don’t feel very comfortable with angels anymore, but they have always been part of our foundational Christian story and occasional interlocutors ever since. Trapped in our western post-Enlightenment rationalism perhaps we have become blind to matters of the Spirit even within the Church, rather like Eli and his generation struggled to recognise the word of the Lord. Such materialistic reductionism is especially the curse of Protestant Christians, even some of those who forensically dissect the Bible which contains its stories of angelic messengers.

Whilst angels seem to be largely a feature of biblical writing after the return from Babylon, they do play a significant role in the Christian story. Gabriel, who first appears to Daniel to foretell the coming of the Messiah, the ‘Anointed One’ in Daniel 9:21-27 comes again firstly to Zacharias to tell him of John the Baptist’s name and future, and again to Mary to announce that she will conceive by the Holy Spirit, and although unnamed was probably speaking again to the shepherds on the hillside.

An angel spoke to Joseph in a dream (Matthew 1:20); an angel came and ministered to Jesus in the Wilderness (Mark 1:13) and in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:43); angels appeared in the empty tomb on Easter morning (John 20:12); an angel appeared to Cornelius the Centurion (Acts 10:3); an angel broke Peter and John free from prison in Jerusalem (Acts 5:19); an angel sent Philip the evangelist down to the less frequented desert road (Acts 8:26) and released Peter a second time from prison in Acts (12:7); an angel reassures Paul the night before the great storm at sea (in Acts 27:23).

Whether we see so few angels today is due to the fact that angels do not exist, but are mere literary devices to describe people undergoing a religious experience, or whether their scarcity is due to the fact that we do not believe in them and so we do not see them, or whether some people do see them, but keep it to themselves in the face of today’s scepticism is a matter for debate. Clearly, the people of Jesus’ day and culture believed in angels and tried to describe them in terms they understood.

The existence of angels has traditionally been affirmed by the Christian Church until the advent of secular rationalism began to infiltrate western Protestant circles, but the matter is a good example when considering the phenomenon of cultural blindness.

We know that Eli and others like him down the ages lost the ability to recognise the work of the Spirit around them.

We know that modern stage magic depends on the habit people have of seeing what they expect to see.

We acknowledge that teaching people about art enables people to see and understand art in a new and deeper fashion – yet we baulk at the idea that people can be taught the art of spiritual discernment. Simply because secular western society has lost the ability to see and hear the word and work of the Spirit we are supposed to accept that the word and work of the Spirit do not exist.

Fortunately, the ‘lamp of God has not yet gone out’ and one day, you might be the one to hear Jesus saying to you: “Follow me.”

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