

Sermon from Fiona Gardiner 17 January 2021 - ONE

In those days the word of the Lord was hardly ever heard: visions were rare.

How's your Vision? Are you hearing God these days?

It's so easy, isn't it, to become swamped with the anxieties flooding through our news channels? Covid, Brexit, Riots on Capitol Hill, Impeachment, Refugees, Dementia, Hunger, HIV, Pollution.

Where is God? Where is God's voice? When can we hear God speak and how? Will he really, really speak to us? To me?

Samuel was ...just a lad? Well, a fairly unusual lad, spending his childhood living with Eli, serving the Lord in His temple. And tonight, we find him alone in the Temple, everyone else in bed. It's quiet, apart from the creaks and groans of the structure as the day's heat give way to the cold of night. The lamp of the Lord mustn't go out during the night, so Samuel has to stay watchful. And in the quiet, in the stillness he hears his name being called.

Listening.

It's not just something passive. If our minds are otherwise occupied we may just catch a sound, but we often don't hear it properly.

We need to LISTEN for God.

In the silence.

In his word.

In prayer.

In the hustle and bustle of daily life.

In the desperation of the moment.

In all our fears and doubts.

We need to listen for God's voice in the voices of others. Or in the events that crash into our consciousness.

Because one thing we need never doubt: God is just waiting for us to open our ears, our minds, our hearts to him and he will speak to us. Listening requires the expectation that we are willing to hear.

So let's listen to Mandy now, as she reads to us from the first Book of Samuel.

TWO

Samuel served the Lord but didn't know Him. It's Eli who realises it's God calling, so tells Samuel how to answer.

'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'

Listening. Eager to hear, eager to understand. Eager to build a relationship with this mysterious, powerful Lord God who deigns to call a boy into his plans for his people. Eager to know God better.

Dare we too utter this prayer? *'Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening.'*

When Royston first suggested I might consider training for Reader Ministry, I immediately came up with at least three good reasons why it was a bad idea. Then somebody else suggested it. And someone else and someone else.

Slowly, I began to listen. Slowly, I realised it might actually be the Lord calling me. I remember saying (rather rudely, perhaps) that I'd really prefer letters of fire in the sky as they would be impossible to ignore. Be careful what you ask for. While I didn't get a Divine Sky-Writer decorating the upper atmosphere, every single person I spoke to the next day spoke to me about Reader Ministry. Every. Single. Person. 'All right, God!' I shouted, 'I'm listening now!'

I'd taken a long time to listen properly.

Then there was lots more learning. Learning that God had a purpose for me that actually felt a perfect fit once I gave in to God. Learning that the Lord would ask me to step out of my comfort zones and instead of being terrifyingly out of my depth, He would be teaching me that this was what He'd made me for. I am still learning that the more I lean on Him, the better things turn out and that he really is on my side, even when I mess up. Learning, over and over again, that God loves us truly, madly, deeply, beyond reason, beyond imagination. We are loved.

Listening. Learning. Two steps along the road of following Jesus. Two things we need to keep up during lockdown. Two vital things we need to keep practicing even in the grips of a pandemic and when so much seems to be wrong with our world, so many people under pressure. Because this is not just for ourselves. We need to be listening and learning so that the HOPE we find in following Jesus' call can be shared with others who desperately need it.

Somebody who listened and learned was Nathaniel. Mandy's going to read us his story now.

THREE

Nathaniel had to listen carefully, not be distracted by his prejudices. Philip persuade him to meet Jesus for himself because this was important.

What did he hear? A devastatingly honest appraisal of his integrity...yet Jesus had never met him in person, but had 'seen' him prophetically. Nathaniel is bowled over and cries out his faith.

But Jesus just laughs. *'You think that's remarkable...just wait and see! You'll see heaven broken open...'*

There's more to come, Jesus means: bigger and better and with eternal ramifications. Something to really look forward to. Something worth waiting for. Worth working for. HOPE for a future that is all about God's kingdom of love. And that HOPE is as much for each of us today as it was for Nathaniel.

Because Jesus accomplished what he promised Nathaniel. He lived with people, saw their pain and shared their distress. He showed us how to value each other: men, women, children all experienced God's dynamic love through Jesus' teaching and healing touch. He continued to speak devastating truth to power structures and the religiously complaisant. He was tortured, executed and died. Everything changed when he rose again, breaking open the way to God for all of us, ensuring that death never has the final word.

This is his promise to each of us: there's a better tomorrow, because I am with you today, now, in all this mess. Have hope.

What does this mean for us?

Yes, this world is broken. Yes, things are terrifically tough just now. Yes, some of us are being pushed to our limits. Crisis, suffering and fear are words we hear constantly. But we **also** need to listen hard to the words Jesus speaks to us: *Follow me. Listen to me, learn my ways. I will never leave you or forsake you. I will give you rest. Feed my lambs, feed my sheep. Go into all the world...bring healing, bring hope.'*

Can we envision God's kingdom here and now? Is God calling us to a new way of serving Him? Let's listen, learn and look forward with hope and trust. Let's show others that a better tomorrow starts today. Because of Jesus. With Jesus. Through Jesus.

Call us, Lord and help us to hear you. Teach us how to listen, Lord. Help us to learn to follow you, and be like you so we too can be light and hope for others. Amen.