

Epiphany 2, January 14th 2017

“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening”

Familiar words to many of us, they are used as a Gospel acclamation, an introduction to the reading of the Gospel, in many churches. And today we heard in the OT reading where those words came from.

And so I hope you were listening – it was the story of the young boy, Samuel.

The call of the boy Samuel is one of the most charming stories in scripture. This miracle child of his aging parents was dedicated by them to the Lord, and given to Eli the priest to live in the temple and be his helper.

One night when all was quiet and Samuel and Eli were lying in their beds, a voice called out his name, “Samuel.” Samuel answered: “Here I am” and ran to see what Eli wanted. “I didn’t call,” said Eli, “Lie down again.” And this happened a second time. And a third.

But it was God calling him, and on the third time Eli perceived that it was the Lord calling and said, “Go, lie down: and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, Lord; for your servant is listening.’”

And the Lord called again, “Samuel, Samuel.” Samuel said, “Speak Lord; for your servant is listening.” And the Lord told Samuel what he wanted him to do. Samuel was to destined become an important and pivotal leader of the faith community.

This is not just a children’s story. It is a story for all of us who are most in danger of losing their capacity to hear and respond to the word of the Lord. God needed Samuel to listen. No one else seemed to be listening at that time as we hear, “for the word of the Lord was rare in those days.”

It leaves us with a question: is the word of the Lord rare in these times? Or, is God not heard because no one is listening?

For a while Samuel could hear but he wasn’t listening. He needed the help of old Eli to tune into the real source of sound - to God.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus goes to Galilee and finds Phillip and calls him, saying “Follow me”, and that is what he does.

Philip finds Nathanael who has been sitting under a fig tree. Excited, Philip exclaims that he’s just met the one long promised in the law and the prophets, Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth. Nathanael’s answer is cynical: “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” In those days Nazareth was a small town on a trade route in an area prone to infiltration from robbers and unsavoury characters from neighbouring lands – surely the Messiah wouldn’t come from a place like that?

But his own encounter with Jesus turns Nathanael around. “Rabbi, you are the son of God”, he says. He had felt God present while sitting under the fig tree. He had

told no one about it, yet Jesus mentions the incident right away. Jesus invites him to follow, and that is what he does.

Tomorrow (Monday 15th Jan), in the USA, is Martin Luther King, Jr. Day; a day set aside to commemorate the life of Martin Luther King. He often told his story. He followed his father into the ministry, and had no intention of being a civil rights leader. But there was a time in his life when he was hearing the voice of God calling him to stand up for equality and raise the conscience of the American people.

Despite angry threats, exhausted and afraid, he appealed to God for help. It was at that moment that Martin experienced the presence of God which gave him the courage and faith to pursue his mission. He had heard his name called. He knew what God wanted for him.

Not without difficulty, Samuel, Nathaniel and Martin recognized their callings, the purpose of their lives.

Wouldn't we all like to be able to listen to God; to know when God is speaking, or to be able to distinguish God's voice from all others? It's difficult to listen to God in these times simply because there are too many obstacles, most of which we place.

For instance, there is avoidance. By ignoring a problem or denying that one exists we simply look in another direction and fail to listen. It can be likened to being in a supermarket, and pretending that you didn't see someone and walked up a different aisle, avoiding the possibility of an uncomfortable conversation. In the process you might also have missed an opportunity for reconciliation.

Another obstacle is temptation. All those things that we do to make us "feel" better. Those things that sap our time, energy and resources. These are nothing more than distractions which keep us from doing what we really need to do. We are unable to listen.

There are also guilt, resentment, failure and shame. We are unable to hear the voice of God when we don't look for forgiveness, and have blocked forgiveness from setting us free.

But there's hope for us. We can look at how others were called, and learn from their example. We can profit from the stories of Samuel and Nathanael. We can be inspired by the stories of those who fought for freedom and justice: like Martin Luther King. We do well to take courage from how they responded to God's voice speaking to each of them.

Lastly, we must hear and respond to our own call. Each of us can listen intently for God speaking to us, perhaps through a still, small voice; or, perhaps through the turmoil of daily events.

We need to think and constantly pray – "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening".

Amen.