

Reading: 1 Samuel 3:1-10

I don't know what you are like when you first get woken up. My problem is I have no filter on what I say. The other Sunday afternoon I was having a wee nap after the morning services and a man walked into the vicarage wanting money. Without knocking he walks into the lounge and over to the sofa and starts shaking me. "Father," he said, "Wake up. I need money." "I need sleep. Go away." I said or words to that effect! Our daughter was in the other room. "Why didn't you stop him?" I said, "I wanted to see what would happen" she replied.

Today's Old Testament reading is remarkable on many levels. It's a beautiful account of intergenerational encouragement, listening to God, and Holy Presence. Let me explain.

One of our favourite stories is a ladybird book. It's entitled *Samuel in the Temple*. The drawings fascinate me. Very imaginatively, Samuel is whiter than me! And you can't help but get drawn into the story; it captures your imagination. The boy Samuel is under the mentorship of Eli. They are both asleep near the sacred flame. The sacred flame was kept always burning in the temple as a sign that God's presence was always with them. Cleaning out the container at St Peter's on Tuesday the builders found the sacred lamp that will hang over the reserved sacrament in the restored church. The sacrament is kept in a specially carved cupboard called an ambry. The sacrament, bread and wine, is the sign for us that God is always with us. Samuel is asleep and he hears a voice calling to him - you know the story. It calls him not once, not twice, but three times. Thinking it is Eli, the blind old priest, Samuel goes to him. Eli must be a lot more holy than me; he has a filter on what he says when he is woken. Eli is gracious and wise. Realising it is not him calling, he told Samuel "Go back

to bed and when you hear the voice, say: “Speak Lord, your servant is listening”. Samuel does just that and God does speak to him and outlines his ministry.

Do we have younger people that we are gently encouraging? Do we have young people we are gently encouraging in the faith? Often people fight with their parents, but grandparents and great grandparents are special. I can remember spending time in grandad's workshop. “Why do you spend so much time in your workshop grandad?” I asked him. “Mostly to keep away from grandma,” he told me in all honesty.

The words that Eli gave Samuel are a beautiful way for us all to begin to pray. Whether it's our morning prayer time, or when we wake in the night. “Speak Lord, your servant is listening.”

As we move into this new year, are we listening to God? Do we make a time each day to quietly listen to God or are we too busy to listen?

When I was about Samuel's age, I discovered listening prayer. There are two types of prayer - intercessory and contemplative. Up until I was Samuel's age, I had done intercessory prayer. God bless mum and dad and grandad and granny and our cat, and, if I hadn't had a fight with her, God bless my sister. There's nothing wrong with this sort of prayer. God honours it. But I got to thinking, maybe I need to give God time to talk to me, not a monologue but a dialogue. So, I started listening. Listening to God is the easiest thing you will ever do. Listening to God is the hardest thing you will ever do.

Joy Cowley, a kiwi poet likens it to a telephone conversation:

30. Prayer

“Don't call me, God. I'll call you.”

Well, I don't mean it to be that way.

It is just that prayer tends to be on my terms,
when I've got the time and the inclination,
and even then, I do all the talking,

as though God didn't already know
what was on my heart.

Yes, I'm aware that conversation
is a two-way business
but I guess it's easier for me to talk
because I've got a bit of a hearing problem,
and God's voice is so terribly quiet
that listening can be hard work.
It means tuning into a huge silence
in order to pick up a whisper or two.

I'm not good with silences.
They make me feel disconnected.
I want to shout down the line:
"Are you working? Is anybody there?"

I think I need some practice,
still times to sit with silence
and feel comfortable with it
so that I recognise the voice when it comes.

And who knows? Maybe one day I'll discover
that the best part of prayer
is to let God do most of the talking.

As soon as we begin to pray the prayer of listening, we discover what the mystics call monkey brain. Our minds want to swing from tree to tree. "I need to put the wheelie bins out. The car needs a warrant." That sort of thing. So, I keep a notebook and write down any jobs or insights that come to me. Sometimes we need a little verse from Scripture to keep us focused or attentive. Gently drawing us back. "Speak Lord, your servant is listening", is one such verse.

But then it happens. A moment of total peace. A moment beyond all words when you feel the peace and presence of God. Like a spring of water, we begin

to feel the presence of God, the joy of God's presence bubbling up within us. This presence, this love, is so strong and yet so subtle, that it makes sense of all our wanderings, all our life and all its joys.

As we journey into this New Year, we have learned so much from this one passage: the delight in mentoring the young, the importance of openness to God, and we also learned to keep the vicarage door locked on a Sunday afternoon.

“Speak Lord, your servant is listening”.