

Year B

1 Samuel 3:1-20

“The Lord said to Samuel, “See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears it *tingle*.”¹

When was the last time your ears tingled? It might have been when you were told that you had five minutes to clear your desk; that a taxi had been ordered and you were to leave your company car keys on the desk. It might have been when you were so close to driving into the back of the car in front of

¹ NRSV 1 Samuel 3:1-20

you that you had to pull into the side of the road to let the adrenaline rush subside. It might have been when the doctor had terrible news for you or your loved one. It might have been when the latest North Korean rocket was reported over the Sea of Japan that you feared World War III was just around the corner.

Fear permeates through the tension of the long, restless night of Samuel's awakening to the Lord God. So much tension in fact that the writer very skilfully makes the most of humour to lighten the burden a bit. Jewish humour is well-known for its use of word-

play and irony and we find that very much to the fore in this account. The author has told us that word of the Lord was rare in those days but he has also informed us that the lamp of God had not yet gone out. That is significant because as bad as things were, all hope was not lost. And then the words, 'Shmuel', 'Shmuel', were heard by young 'Shmuel', Samuel. His name means, 'God has heard'. How incredible! His name was being uttered and his master must need him and so up he got in the middle of the night and he went to 'El-i', Eli, whose name means 'my God'. And so we have this remarkable

scene of cross understandings and ironic word-play to keep us on our toes.

What about 'El-i', Eli, the priest? Graham Greene's greatest novel is, in my opinion, *The Power and the Glory*. Greene's novel tells the story of a renegade Roman Catholic 'whisky priest' living in the Mexican state of Tabasco in the 1930s, a time when the Mexican government was attempting to suppress the Catholic Church. The novel explores the experiences of this deeply flawed and complex man as he tries to remain faithful to his calling in the midst of quite unbearable

forces within himself and in the hostile environment outside. Greene wrote of him: “If he left them, they would be safe, and they would be free from his example. He was the only priest the children could remember: it was from him they would take their ideas of the faith. But it was from him too they took God—in their mouths. When he was gone it would be as if God in all this space between the sea and the mountains ceased to exist. Wasn't it his duty to stay, even if they despised him, even if they were murdered for

his sake? even if they were corrupted by his example? (2.1.51)²

When I think of the whisky priest in *The Power and the Glory*, I think of Eli in 1 Samuel. He knows that he has been set aside and anointed to perform a crucial role for the people but he also knows that his failure to bring his sons to order has doomed his house to God's judgement. What is he going to do? He has decisions to make. He could try to pretend that all would come good in the end, that with a little bit of patience this bad spell would end. He could try to

² Greene, Graham 1970 *The Power and the Glory*
New York: Viking Press

just immerse himself in his role and not think about what was happening through the shocking behaviour of his sons. Or he could focus very particularly on the little boy who was entrusted to his care who had quite suddenly, and unpredictably delivered the word of the Lord which was so rare in those days. God takes anointing very seriously indeed, even when human frailty and downright disobedience tries to destroy it. Once an individual is anointed a priest or a minister, whatever we might call the office, that individual remains so forever. It's exactly the same with regards to baptism,

the universal form of anointing. Once baptised, forever baptised - one cannot be unbaptised. It is not possible. Eli knew that his anointing as a priest was effective forever and so in the midst of great personal angst he soldiered on and God heard, 'shmuel', and God spoke. And to Eli's credit when he heard God's word through the testimony of Samuel he did not try to suppress it but he accepted it.

Now, why have the lectionary editors chosen this Old Testament narrative text for today; the Second Sunday after the Epiphany? Well, it's not a random choice, that's for sure.

Remember when Jesus was eight days old, Luke wrote that he was taken to the Temple in Jerusalem to be circumcised and presented to God. There he was greeted by Simeon who blessed him and said; “this child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel.”³ The exact same could be said of Samuel and that’s not a coincidence. Later in Luke’s Gospel we read the story of the boy Jesus in the same Temple more than holding his own with the teachers, listening and asking them questions. The word of God, in both stories,

³ NIV Luke 2:34

is delivered through the lips of a boy to people who have become de-sensitised to listening for God. Luke wants his readers to remember the Samuel story when he tells his unique story of the boy Jesus because he wants to make it clear that God has heard, and this time the whole world will hear too. Who will speak truth to power? - a little boy will. Who will slay the giant Philistine warrior, Goliath? - a little boy will. Who will supply the food to feed a multitude? - a little boy will, and so the Biblical narrative goes on with the weak and the insignificant speaking truth to power.

How do you feel today with the great burdens of this world all around you? We tend to feel small and very insignificant. We cannot fool the powerful by a show of false bravado. The influence of the Church has declined markedly over the years to the extent that we are now the marginalised few. We may lament our weakness and decline and get stuck in a depressive resignation. But when we read our Scriptures each week together we hear something different. We hear the weak and the marginalised speaking truth to power all the time. We hear Jesus call his disciples to bring the children to him and

then he challenges the disciples to become like the children! It's counter-intuitive but it's the way in which God has chosen to reveal his truth to an arrogant and wayward world.

Winston Churchill has been quoted as saying: "Men occasionally stumble over the truth, but most of them pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing had happened."⁴

Maybe that is why God spoke to a little boy in the temple who would not simply carry on as if nothing had happened. Maybe the challenge to all of us today is that we would

⁴ 1942 April, Reader's Digest, Volume 40, Picturesque Speech and Patter, Page 92, The Reader's Digest Association

not hurry off and do something else, but instead be willing to stand and speak out that others would receive God's great message of salvation and hope. Are your ears tingling today? May God encourage and strengthen us. Amen.