

1 SAMUEL 3:1-21  
LISTEN!

Listening is one of the hardest things we do. It must be, because we so often get it wrong! Eugene Peterson, an American pastor tells the story of reports that he was making to his bishop and he was convinced that these reports were not being read; so at the next quarter he sent a report in which he said that he had begun to have an affair with someone in his church; the reply came 'I'm glad everything is going well!' In his next report he said that he was continuing the affair and had now started drinking heavily; again the reply – 'I'm glad that everything is going well'. In his next report he said that the affair is continuing, he is now drinking vast amounts of alcohol and had begun to take anti-depressant drugs. Again the reply: 'I'm glad everything is going well'. He decided to challenge the bishop the next time they met and was told 'oh, yes, I read all of your reports' to which he replied "then, what are you going to do about my affair, my alcohol consumption and my depression?" There was silence! The bishop had not been listening.

One of the qualities of a healthy Church is a Church that seeks to find out what God wants. This is a high ideal and one that has always been at the heart of Church life. We are a people who are supposed to be committed to do the will of God. The Church is meant to be place where we wrestle with what it means to be God's people in a messy world, a place where the values of life are not shaped by money and possessions, but by a different set of values; we are meant to be a people who seek to find out what God wants. How do we do that? It begins by listening; we need to find out what God wants, so we need to listen for God. How can we listen for the God whom we don't see when we find it so hard to listen to people we do see and meet every day? Listening is such a hard thing to do? Listening is more than hearing: sometimes we hear, but we don't listen; we hear the words, but we don't take them in.

The story of Samuel is both an exciting story and a cautionary tale at one and the same time. It is the story of a young boy discovering God, finding out that God does speak and that his life can be shaped by what God wants. It's exciting to discover new things and wonderful things to lead us to faith or build us up in that faith. It is also a cautionary tale because Eli should have known better; it took him far too long to realise what was going on; were his spiritual senses dulled because he had got out of the way of seeking to know what God wanted? Had he forgotten to do that, forgotten to listen?

Samuel was a boy; we're not told how old he was, but he was 'just a lad', perhaps about 12 years old. His job was to help Eli look after the place of worship at Shiloh. His mother, Hannah, had given Samuel to serve the Lord as a way of saying 'thank you' for the gift of a son; she had yearned for, longed for a son and God answered her prayers (see ch 2) Samuel's job was to help Eli look after this place of worship; he helped open and close the doors, and tend the lamps, that kind of thing. He had been doing this for a while. One night as lying down to sleep, Samuel heard a voice calling his name. His first instinct is to run to Eli: "*Here I am...*" (v5) to which Eli said 'no!' It happened again and Eli said "*I did...*" (v6) Then it happened a third time and the third time Samuel got up and went to Eli and said "*Here...*" (v8) Only then did Eli realise what was happening; only then did he understand that Samuel was hearing the voice of God: "*Go and...*" (v9) Samuel did and when God spoke to him again he said to God "*Speak for...*" (v10)

This is all new to Samuel: "*Samuel did...*" (v7) so when God speaks he has no idea what is going on. He needs someone to guide him and when Eli helps him

understand what is going on, he listens avidly for what God is about to say. “See /...” (v11) and God goes on to tell Samuel about Eli’s wayward sons and what will happen to them because of their waywardness. When Eli wakes, he wants to know what God has said to Samuel and after taking a deep breath, Samuel repeats what God has said. “The lord...” (vv19ff) His whole life of being a prophet, speaking God’s words to Israel, began here with the boy Samuel listening for God, taking to heart what God had said and learning to live by it.

There is a huge contrast at the end of the story from the start: “In those days...” (v1) Why was that? Why was the Word of the Lord rare? Had God stopped speaking? Had the people stopped listening? Was a man like Eli deaf to the word of the Lord, no longer listening for God to speak? Is that why it took him so long to understand what was happening to Samuel? Was the lad more aware, more open, more receptive to God than the old man because the old man had forgotten to listen? That is speculation, but it must be something like that! There used to be rule in Rugby, that when you had ball you had to “use it or lose it”; was it the same with the Word of the Lord in the days of Eli – ‘use it or lose it’ and people had not used it so they had lost it?

The healthy Church seeks to find out what God wants. How do we do that? How do we listen to God in our 21<sup>st</sup> century world? We’re not talking about people hearing voices, but we are talking about a serious engagement with the Bible. It is in the pages of the bible that we find out what God wants: what kind of people does God want us to be? What kind of values should shape our life? How should churches live and behave? What kind of relationships should we form? What is God like? How does God save the world? The answers to all of these questions are in the Bible. Yet, the statistics tells that only 10% of Christians read the Bible regularly. There are two possible reasons for that: 1)that people find it hard to read and understand so we don’t do it – well there are all kinds of notes and study guides that will help us engage with the Bible so that we can understand what it says and means; 2)that we don’t see its value and so don’t want to do it. How then can we be the kind of people that God wants? It is not possible unless we listen.

Robert Murray M’Cheyne was minister in the Free Church in Dundee in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and on 31<sup>st</sup> December 1842 he introduced his congregation to a Bible reading guide called ‘Daily Bread’. It was a scheme of his own making that included four chapters every day, two to be read as family and two to be read in secret; he also suggested singing three verses of a metrical psalm each day. By doing that, his congregation would read whole the Bible in a year and the New Testament and Psalms twice. He recognised that there were dangers: this might be too hard a thing to ask etc, but he also knew that there would be huge advantages for his congregation: Christians can talk together about what they’ve been reading; “we shall pray over the same promises, mourn over the same confessions, praise God in the same songs and be nourished by the same words of eternal life.”

There is huge value in serious Bible reading and Bible study: we read the promises that God makes to His people so that our faith is strengthened and deepened; we are challenged about the kind of people we are, like looking in a mirror we are made to consider the faults and failings of our lives so that we make the changes that we need to make; we praise God because we begin to see in a new way how good and gracious God is and that will draw out from us a spirit of thankfulness; our faith will grow, we will be nourished by a diet of food that is good for us, learning new things, understanding new things, being shaped and guided by new things. We can read and learn these things on our own as we read the Bible for ourselves; we can learn these things as we listen to the preaching; we can also learn together when we meet for

Bible study in groups. The only way we can be (or become) a church that seeks to know what God wants is to engage seriously with the Bible in all of these ways.

Eli bothers me. Eli bothers me because he is slow to grasp what's happening. Eli bothers me because he seems to have neglected something very special and lost something very valuable. Eli bothers me because I see the Church in Scotland going in the same direction! He responds slowly when he really should have known the first time what was happening to Samuel; the young lad much more receptive to listen for God than the old man is. He seems to have neglected to listen for the word of God and so lost it altogether – “use it or lose it!” Why is it that bible study and prayer are minority interests in the Church today? Sometimes only very small minority interests at that? Is it because we have lost the desire to find out what God wants? Is it because we know all the answers already? Is it because we are so familiar with the bible that we know it thoroughly? For the Church to be healthy we need to seek out what God wants; to do that, the challenge for us is to engage seriously with the Bible to listen.

James is ever the man to show us how to do something practical. He tells us to listen; he does it in two ways: 1)to listen to one another: “*Everyone...*” (1:19); 2)to listen to God's word: “*Do not ...*” (1:22) Reading the Bible is not about learning for sake of quoting it off by heart; reading the Bible is not about being so dogmatic that you're right and everyone else is wrong; reading the Bible is about learning to do what it says. It is like looking into a mirror, seeing yourself in a new way and living life in a right and good way. I find it fascinating that James has these two 'listen's side by side: listen to one another; listen to God's word; surely the two are linked in his mind; how can we claim to listen for God's word when we find it hard to listen to one another in ordinary conversation?

2009 is the 200th anniversary of the Scottish Bible Society; it is a hugely honourable event and later in the year you will have the opportunity to celebrate that anniversary. For 200 years it has been the aim of the SBS to persuade people in Scotland to read the Bible, to learn from it and do what it says; that is still its aim. Why? Because the book contains wisdom to teach us life and how to live it; because it teaches us the promises of God to make our faith stronger; because it tells us the stories of Jesus so that we can live life by faith; because it shows us what we are like in ourselves, so that we can leave behind all the bad bits of human nature and learn to be more like Christ. Nowhere else will you find these treasures; only in the Bible will you find these treasures. The story of Samuel is a wonderful young person's discovery of God speaking, the word of the Lord shaping his life, the kind of person he would become and the life he would live; Eli reminds us that we can lose all of this by neglect. Learn to listen; stay awake to listen; listen to one another; listen for God's Word. That's the challenge of Samuel: “*Speak Lord...*”