

WORSHIP AT HOME FOR 17TH JANUARY 2021 – CALLED BY NAME

Dear friends,

Here we are again in lockdown – let us hope that this is the last we have to face and that vaccination will be a route out of the situation so that we can return to a life somewhat nearer ‘normal’ for us. This week we see how we need one another to understand how God calls us in ways we might find astonishing. Only together can Samuel, the young boy who does not yet know God, and Eli, the old man who has been blind to corruption, hear what God is saying to them about a tumultuous end and a new beginning. And it is together that the community of disciples called by Jesus will come to understand that a cruel cross is the ladder between heaven and earth.

Take care and keep safe – may we soon be able to come together again in fellowship as we worship God.

Margaret

Call to Worship: Come, let us worship the Lord who made us; who knows our every thought before it is formed. See the one from whom nothing is hidden – hear him speak.

Come, let us worship and listen. **Amen**

The words to ‘Master, speak! Thy servant heareth’ written by Frances Ridley Havergal [1836-1879]

Singing the Faith 666

1 Master, speak! Thy servant heareth, waiting for thy gracious word,
longing for thy voice that cheereth, Master, let thy voice be heard.

I am listening, Lord, for thee; what hast thou to say to me?

2 Speak to me by name, O Master, let me know it is to me;
Speak, that I may follow faster, with a step more firm and free,
where the Shepherd leads the flock in the shadow of the rock.

3 Master, speak! Though least and lowest, let me not unheard depart;
Master, speak! For O thou knowest all the yearning of my heart,
knowest all its truest need; speak, and make me blest indeed.

4 Master, speak; and make me ready when thy voice is truly heard,
with obedience glad and steady still to follow every word.

I am listening, Lord, for thee; Master, speak! O speak to me!

Prayer: Gracious and loving Lord, you came to Samuel in the Temple and he began his walk with you. May we be open to your moving among us.

Loving Lord Jesus, you found those you called in the everyday places of life, and they acknowledged your teaching. May we, too, be open to your leading.

Gracious Spirit, you unite all those who give their lives to God and acknowledge him as the source of their life and peace. Unite us, as one body in Christ, not only now, but forever.

Powerful God, we see your power all around us – in the crashing of the waves – in the bursting forth of new life, from all that has lain dormant.

Gentle God, we feel your gentleness in the softness of the snowflake – in the gentle, caressing rain and in the warm blanket wrapped round us.

Loving God, for your coming into our world in your Son, Jesus – for his revealing your boundless love for us, whom you created in your image – we give you praise.

Creator God, for your ingenuity in creation – for the great variety of all that you have made – for the way each part of your creation depends on each other – and for all that we still have to discover and understand – Lord, we thank you.

Life-giving God, for the new life we find with you each new day as we live in your world, and for the promise of everlasting life in your presence, we praise you and thank you. **Amen.**

But, Lord, we are not always very good at listening to you, especially if we think you are going to say something we may not like. We are sorry that so often we are not prepared to give you, and others, the space to speak to us.

Forgive us in our deafness, our impatience, our stubbornness, and all the other 101 things that block out your word. Forgive us, we pray.

Father God, we thank you that we do not have to earn your forgiveness. It is not based on how worthy we are. We are forgiven through Christ Jesus. It is by grace that our sins are forgiven, **Amen**

We give you thanks, Lord, for Samuel and Eli and the way they worked together as a team, hearing your voice and deciding what had to be done – the young and the old – the listener and the counsellor – impatience and wisdom. May we learn from them how to serve you better. **Amen**

The Lord's Prayer: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

1 Samuel 3: 1-10 [11-20] using NRSV:

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.

At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. Then the Lord called: 'Samuel!' and he said: 'Here I am!' and ran to Eli and said: 'Here I am., for you called me.' But he said: 'I did not call, lie down again.' So Samuel went and lay down. The Lord called again: 'Samuel!' Samuel got up again and went to Eli and said: 'Here I am, for you called me.' But Eli said: 'I did not call, my son. Lie down again.' Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli and said: 'Here I am, for you called me.' Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy.

Therefore Eli said to Samuel: 'Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening,"' so Samuel went and lay down in his place.

Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before: 'Samuel! Samuel!'. And Samuel said: 'Speak, for your servant is listening.' Then the Lord said to Samuel: 'See, I am about to do something for Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears it tingle. On that day I will fulfil against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever.'

Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the Lord. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. But Eli called Samuel and said: 'Samuel, my son.' He said: 'Here I am.' Eli said: 'What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you.' So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then Eli said: 'It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him.'

As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord.

John 1: 43-51 using NRSV: The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him: 'Follow me.' Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathaniel and said to him: 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth'. Nathaniel said to him: 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him: 'Come and see'. When Jesus saw Nathaniel coming toward him, he said of him: 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' Nathaniel asked him: 'Where did you get to know me?' Jesus answered: 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.' Nathaniel replied: 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' Jesus answered: 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.' And he said to him: 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'

Comment: *I read a piece by Jane Williams in her Lectionary Reflections which has guided my thoughts here.*

At the beginning of the reading from Samuel we see 'the word of the Lord was rare in those days'. A picture is already being drawn in front of our eyes – around Eli and the once famous shrine at Shiloh – a picture of a society which doesn't automatically expect the presence of God among them. Earlier, when Hannah had been praying in the temple, Eli thought instead that she had been drinking – probably what generally happened then. It seems that he hadn't been used to people coming in from the streets to fall on their knees before God. He was more used to people using the shrine as shelter from the sun or even a place to sleep off a hangover from a good party – or, really shamefully, a place where his sons ran their rackets. He no longer expects people to turn to the shrine to seek the word of God.

Eli probably inherited his priestly role, just as his sons expected to do. They were so used to the idea that they began to treat the shrine more as a family business than a holy place where they had a calling to serve the Lord. Eli, at least, does seem to have some vestiges left of his priestly training and these rise to the surface under pressure. When he had at last realised Hannah's real need, he did come up with [albeit impersonally and blandly] the correct kind of response. I don't suppose he ever expected to hear anything more about it – though, a few years later, when Hannah returned with a small child, expecting Him to remember all about it, Eli did react well.

It was now that things gathered pace for Eli. He had casually – probably without really thinking about it – invoked the name and the power of God for Hannah – and he opened up a tiny channel and the word of the Lord was streaming through, for later 'a man of God' came to give a message to Eli – and now, here, the message is repeated through Samuel. Jane Williams remarks that there must have been some part of Eli that longed for the old days, when the Lord kept quiet, and he didn't have to face the reality of the degradation that he and his sons had brought upon their profession and the family shrine!

Even when Eli suspected that it was God calling Samuel he, a priest, didn't go back with the boy to wait with him in the hope that he, too, might hear the God whom, in theory, he has served all his life. Instead, he sent the boy back alone, while he pulled the blankets over his head. Mind you, Eli never disbelieved the message from God. He knew it was just and true. He didn't hear the voice of God himself but he did recognise it.

So what impression do we get of Eli as a man? Not wholly bad but forgetful of his duty – sorrowful about the behaviour of his sons but not strong enough to stop them or to send them away. He had had no idea what his perfunctory words of blessing to Hannah would unleash. Perhaps he sometimes sat and thought nostalgically about the old days when the word of the Lord was regularly heard by his people – now he would discover that that word wasn't just a nice merit award but was the proclamation of the justice of God – and it would have terrible consequences for him and his sons.

From the Gospel it would seem that when Nathaniel first met Jesus he was prepared to find Jesus exciting, and even to see everything Jesus did as being almost magical. I wonder how he reacted to Jesus' drily deflating words or if, and when, he ever came to understand the reference to Jesus as the ladder of the angels. When Nathaniel had run eagerly up to Jesus he would have had no idea about how God chose to

bring heaven and earth together through the Son of Man. He would have had no conception of the hard road ahead – but he did join the band of twelve disciples around Jesus.

The words to ‘Hushed was the evening hymn’ written by James Drummond Burns [1823-1864] HP 523

1 Hushed was the evening hymn, the temple courts were dark,
The lamp was burning dim before the sacred ark,
When suddenly a voice divine rang through the silence of the shrine.

2 The old man, meek and mild, the priest of Israel slept;
His watch, the temple child, the little Levite, kept;
And what from Eli’s sense was sealed the Lord to Hannah’s son revealed.

3 O give me Samuel’s ear, the open ear, O Lord,
Alive and quick to hear each whisper of thy word,
Like him to answer at thy call, and to obey thee first of all.

4 O give me Samuel’s heart, a lowly heart, that waits
Where in thy house thou art or watches at thy gates
By day and night – a heart that still moves at the breathing of thy will.

5 O give me Samuel’s mind, a sweet un murmuring faith,
Obedient and resigned to thee in life and death,
That I may read with childlike eyes truths that are hidden from the wise.

A personal prayer: Lord, I can’t help but be amazed when I see Samuel’s obedience. I wish I was more like that. Sometimes, trying to hear what you are saying is like listening to the radio; sometimes it is loud and clear, but sometimes it goes a bit off station – there’s too much distraction. Sometimes, all I get is a lot of background noise – and then there are the times when it seems as though it is in a foreign language. It sounds quite distinct – but what is it saying? Help me, Lord, to have clear airwaves so I can tune in to you at all times. **Amen.**

Meditation: [Nick Fawcett – The Unfolding Story]

Three times he called me – three times that same compelling voice calling my name – and I was baffled, unable to make sense of what was happening.
Was I slow on the uptake? Perhaps – but the voice of God! The possibility never crossed my mind – why should it have? It had to be *Eli*, that’s what I assumed – no reason to think different.
But when I went to him that third time, and still he stared at me blankly, we both realised something strange was going on – this voice unlike any I’d heard before. I was still puzzled, still struggling to take it all in – but I could see Eli had grasped something I hadn’t – a curious mixture of joy and apprehension in his eyes.
It is the Lord, he told me – go back and be ready to answer. So I went, and I waited and I listened; tense, but eager; nervous, yet excited – wondering what God could possibly want from a youngster like me. I soon knew, for he spoke again, as unmistakably as before – and this time I was all ears, receptive to whatever he might say. But I wish I hadn’t been – I wish I’d buried my head in my pillow and thrust that voice aside, for the message it brought me was one of warning – stern, solemn, forbidding – about justice, pain and punishment.....about Eli. I wanted to keep it quiet, pretend I’d never heard, but Eli would have none of it, insisting I tell him every word.

So I spat it out, and from the way he took it I realised it came as no surprise – almost as though he knew what I'd say even before I told him. It was dreadful nonetheless, perhaps the worst moment of my life, having to break news like that, and it would have been so much easier to hide the truth – or at least, dress it up more kindly. But I didn't – I came straight out with it with all the clumsiness of youth – and strangely Eli was grateful – as if, painful though it was – he needed to hear that message; almost glad, in a way, to get it done with. And I realised why later, for though the words were grim and the message harsh, it gave him the courage he'd been looking for – which he'd tried to find for so long – to be honest with himself and honest with God – and so finally find peace.

Prayer: O Lord hear my prayer – O Lord hear my prayer. When I call, answer me. O Lord hear my prayer – O Lord hear my prayer – come and listen to me.

Think about the people you know in your fellowship, knowing that though you cannot meet together just now you are in each other's hearts. Think about ways you can be a blessing to family and friends – and strangers – in time to come, in Jesus' name. Listen to the stillness – and also the noises around you; all part of God's created world, and of humanity. Listen – is God bringing to mind people and places where he is already working? Offer all you have and are – all you say and do – to God and ask that he will help you to bring his light and blessing to all you do and to all with whom you speak – ask that his light may shine through you now and in the future.

Jesus, Son of God, we pray for our world and for those who hold power to make a difference in the lives of the poor and voiceless. Jesus, Son of God, give wisdom and courage.

Jesus, King of Israel, we pray for the Church; for those who are exploring faith and for those who teach them..... Jesus, King of Israel, give unity and peace.

Jesus, Son of Man, we pray for those in need of healing and restoration..... and for the bereaved and those who have died in the faith of Christ.....Jesus, Son of Man, give patience and light.

Jesus, Lamb of God, we pray for ourselves – for the things we worry about and for the people we care about. Jesus, Lamb of God, give hope and understanding. And in your mercy, hear our prayer. **Amen**

The words to 'Sometimes a light surprises' written by William Cowper [1731-1800] HP 571

1 Sometimes a light surprises the Christian while he sings.
It is the Lord who rises with healing in his wings.
When comforts are declining, he grants the soul again
A vision of clear shining, to cheer it after rain.

2 In holy contemplation, we sweetly then pursue
The theme of God's salvation and find it ever new.
Set free from present sorrow we cheerfully can say,
Now let the unknown morrow bring with it what it may.

3 It can bring with it nothing but he will bear us through;
Who gives the lilies clothing will clothe his people too.
Beneath the spreading heavens no creature but is fed;
And he who feeds the ravens will give his children bread.

4 Though vine nor fig tree neither their wonted fruit should bear;
Though all the field should wither, nor flocks nor herds be there,
Yet, God the same abiding, his praise shall tune my voice;
For, while in him confiding, I cannot but rejoice.

Closing Prayer:

Here I am, Lord. Speak, for your servant is listening. Act, for your servant is waiting. This week, Lord, help me to be attentive to you for I am listening, watching, waiting for you. Come, Holy Spirit, come. **Amen**