

3¹ 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.

2 At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; ³the 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. ⁴Then the Lord called, 'Samuel! Samuel!' and he said, 'Here I am!' ⁵and ran to Eli, and said, 'Here I am, for you called me.' But he said, 'I did not call; lie down again.' So he went and lay down. ⁶The Lord called again, 'Samuel!' Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, 'Here I am, for you called me.' But he said, 'I did not call, my son; lie down again.' ⁷Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. ⁸The 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. ⁹Therefore 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.

10 Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, 'Samuel! Samuel!' And Samuel said, 'Speak, for your servant is listening.' (NRSV)

Do you remember your dreams? One of the few I remember is dreaming that I was in the main shopping precinct in Coventry in my pyjamas, unable to find any clothes and with no money to buy any!

Some people have very vivid dreams and can be haunted by recurring nightmares. However, I have known had people describe to me how they felt that God had spoken to them through a dream. The messages were of reassurance rather than anything specific, but it does seem to be a way in which God can speak.

Our reading today is the story of a young man, Samuel, who heard God's voice in the night. To set the scene, we need to remind ourselves of something of the story of the people of Israel. Having escaped from Egypt under Moses and Joshua and having settled in the land, Israel had been a kind of loose federation of tribes with a shared heritage. Every now and then they were threatened, and God had called people to lead them – the time described in the Book of Judges.

We join the story in what appears to be a quieter period, although conflict with the Philistines will follow soon. There is no temple in Jerusalem yet; instead, the people of Israel have a shrine to the Lord at a place called Shiloh (located on what is now the West Bank) where Eli is the priest. Samuel had been dedicated to the Lord by his mother, Hannah, and he was a kind of apprentice to Eli, and it soon becomes clear that Samuel is a prophet who will lead and guide Israel and eventually anoint and challenge its kings.

Our reading today is the account of his call. What strikes me is that if you were going to call someone to an incredibly important and influential role, with the fate of an entire people in their hands, you would probably want someone with experience, and a proven track record in political leadership, or perhaps in military endeavour. You would want to see their CV, their qualifications and so on. But God calls a young boy. We may look to people who make headlines, but God doesn't seem swayed by reputation, fame, fortune or previous achievements; he sees beyond all of them. He appoints a young boy as the prophet for Israel.

That left me with a couple of questions. Children can speak profound truths to us – Jesus tells us that. When others are shooing children away from him, he takes a small child and says they are an example to us of how to receive the Kingdom of God (Matthew 18:1-5). How open are we to what children might have to say to us?

God's voice is also occasionally found in the unexpected places. Samuel the prophet was a young boy, centuries later the prophet Jeremiah points to his own youth as an obstacle to being a prophet (Jeremiah 1:6-8), and the prophet Amos was a shepherd and looked after sycamore-fig trees (Amos 7:14) but can't help but speak God's message.

I remember once meeting someone who brought a group of young people from quite a deprived area along to a youth event. She said she was quite intimidated by some of the youth leaders there who were energetic and trendy. I remember saying to her that she shouldn't worry – she was an effective youth leader. Of course, she protested, so I simply reminded her of how many young people she had brought along, and what a difference she was clearly making in their lives.

The lesson of Samuel is that God works with the unlikely to do unexpected things in unconventional ways. We simply need to be listening.

Almighty God,
in Christ you make all things new:
transform the poverty of our nature by the riches of your grace,
and in the renewal of our lives
make known your heavenly glory;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**