**3rd June 2018**

**The Very Rev’d Frank Nelson**

*1 Samuel 3: 1 - 10*

*Psalm 139: 1 – 6, 13 - 18*

*2 Corinthians 4: 5 - 12*

*Mark 2: 23 – 3: 6*

The delightful story of the events surrounding the birth and then the call of Samuel must surely have been in the mind of St Luke when he wrote his Gospel. Not only do we have the parallels of two barren women but there is the Song of Hannah closely paralleled by the Song of Mary. Today’s snippet of the story has Samuel as a young boy asleep in the temple of the Lord. It’s worth noticing one or two things in the opening lines of 1 Samuel 3. Coming only two weeks after the great festival of Pentecost with the quotation from the prophet Joel about young men seeing visions and old men dreaming dreams, we should note that in Samuel’s day the ‘word of the Lord was rare’, and ‘visions were not widespread.’ (1 Sam 3: 1) It’s as if no one is listening to God anymore – which was precisely the case, for Eli the priest was old, and his sons were so busy cheating the people under the guise of doing God’s work, that they could not possibly hear God’s word for themselves or the people.

Even though Samuel is in the temple, in the presence of God, symbolized by the lamp burning through the night, God must call three times before he finally recognizes God’s voice. On the third attempt Samuel listens and responds as he had been coached by Eli: ‘Speak, for your servant is listening.’ (1 Sam 3: 10) When he does hear the message it is little wonder that Samuel would have preferred not to hear it. But that is for you to read about on your own.

Today I want to suggest that we take time to listen to the word of God as offered to us in our four readings this morning. We have already touched on the call of Samuel. Samuel would go on to become one of the pivotal leaders of the Hebrew people, standing at the cross-roads of transition between one form of government and another. If you like, Samuel introduces a new creation, a new way of being God’s people, of living the kingdom of God. With the eventual appointment by Samuel of first Saul and then David as king, the scene is set for another phase in God’s ongoing saga of creation and the great story of God’s liberating, loving, life-giving power – the coming of the Messiah.

But before we get to Jesus, the Gospels and then the writings of St Paul and the rest of the New Testament, we have the psalms. As Canon Jenny reminded us at the funeral last week of David Swale, the psalms span the whole gamut of human emotion - belief, doubt, love, anger, joy, despair … Today’s psalm, extracts from Psalm 139, can be read as a psalm of great comfort: from the very beginning God knows and understands me at the very deepest of levels. It can also be quite disturbing: God knows everything about me; there is nothing and nowhere that I can hide from God. If we are to listen to God, we do so surely because God is already listening to us in a most profound way.

And so to St Paul and 2 Corinthians 4. This is a passage brimming with so many densely woven ideas and images that I found it helpful to take a pen and underline some of the words and phrases that stood out for me, or that I felt I wanted to explore a little more. There is nothing new in this; it is a method of reading the bible known as *lectio divina*. The idea is to read a passage slowly and thoughtfully, noticing what interests, disturbs, intrigues, enlightens. Try it and see what happens.

* I found myself intrigued by the contrast of proclaiming Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as slaves – and almost immediately needed to look up the story of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples (cf John 13) and that marvelous early Christian hymn found in Philippians 2. “Christ Jesus .. though he was in the form of God … emptied himself, taking the form of a slave…” (Phil 2: 6 & 7)
* I found myself wanting to dwell on the quote from Genesis, ‘Let light shine out of darkness’ (Gen 1: 6) and all that has to offer in this new creation, founded on Jesus of Nazareth, his death and resurrection, and the new life which, according to St Paul, we put on at baptism.
* I found myself disturbed by the daring of God in trusting this Gospel message, this treasure, to what Paul calls ‘clay jars’. It’s a powerful metaphor of the fragility and weakness of humans in contrast to the extraordinary power that belongs to God. When I am tempted, as I am, to think I can do great things in my own strength, that this Cathedral is mine because I am the Dean and have my own special seat in the Cathedral – the clay jar image is one for me to remember and think on.
* I find myself enormously encouraged when I read St Paul talking about being afflicted, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed. (2 Cor 4: 8) Christians need to hear that today. God calls and equips and does not abandon God’s people.

What happens when we listen to today’s Gospel reading, the story of Jesus going through the cornfields on the Sabbath with his hungry disciples; healing the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath? Who is listening – or not listening here? The Pharisees get a bad press in the gospels – which in some ways, is a pity, because they were actually the pious, holy, bible-reading, bible-studying, praying, worshipping people of their day. And yet, time after time, they missed the point. The Sabbath is such an interesting concept. It is linked intimately with the first creation narrative in Genesis, and embedded in the Ten Commandments given to Moses – coming in at number four. The Pharisees knew this, they were experts on the Ten Commandments; their scholars spent their lives working out how to keep God’s Law even in very different circumstances and contexts to those in which Moses lived.

I grew up in a culture which kept the Sabbath as a holy day. Sunday was to be a day of rest. There were no shops open. People, for the most part, went to church. There was certainly no organized sport, or sitting of scholarship exams for entry into church schools. Even recreation fishing was banned in one state (which meant those who lived on the river which formed the border simply crossed the bridge and fished from the other side!) The Pharisees took the prohibition of work on the Sabbath to extraordinary lengths, as orthodox Jews do today. And yet they missed the point of it all, as Jesus was quick to point out: ‘The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath.’ (Mark 2: 27)

If the Pharisees missed the point, misheard the real wisdom of the Ten Commandments, it seems fair to ask of ourselves: What are we missing? Who are we not listening to? The founder of the centuries-old Benedictine monastic movement said that when the community gathers for discussion, the youngest should be listened to first. Who do we not listen to because they are too young, or from the wrong political party, or speak with a different accent to mine, or come from a different culture, or say things I don’t want to hear?

There’s an interesting Greek word used to describe a certain kind of not listening – *skotosis*. It means more than simply not listening to, or being open to hearing what the other is saying. *Skotosis* includes the idea of *deliberately* not listening to or seeing the other. It is an intentional blindness and deafness.

As the Week of Reconciliation draws to a close for the year, we could do well to ask who is not being heard in Australia today. God knows, it has taken long enough for Australia’s first people to begin to feel listened to, noticed, taken seriously.

Listening is just the beginning. The Latin word from which we get the English word audience is also the root of the word obedience. To really listen to God is to obey. But that, perhaps, is a topic for another sermon on another occasion.

Today’s Collect, as so often, adds to our thoughts and prayers:

*Lord God of the nations, you have revealed your will to all people and promised your saving help: help us to hear and do what you command, that the darkness may be overcome by the power of your light; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.*