

Sermon

Sunday 17 January 2021

Lesson

1 Samuel 3: 1 – 10

For a few moments, let us think imaginatively about the story of Samuel in the temple. We may read it as a straightforward record of what happened, a minute by minute account, or we may dig a little deeper and explore possible meanings lying beneath the surface of the story.

In the temple at Shiloh, in the night's quietest hours, the boy Samuel lay alone in the darkness. The temple housed the Ark of God; the Covenant Box which contained the two stone tablets of the Ten Commandments. On Mount Sinai, Moses, the greatest of the prophets, wrote out the Laws of God, chiselled from *lapis lazuli*, a deep-blue metamorphic rock. The Ark had been carried as the vanguard of the Hebrew slaves as they made their pilgrimage through the wilderness to the Promised Land. Honoured to be the servant of the priest Eli, Samuel served in the temple.

The Ark was made of wood and on its lid sat two cherubim: composite creatures with the body of a lion or bull, head of a human and the wings of an eagle. This was the throne of the LORD of Hosts, and the lid was the seat of mercy. It was from the Ark that God first called to Samuel and, on the fourth occasion, God came and stood there. An intense moment of mystical encounter, God appeared to Samuel as once God had done before Moses at the burning bush.

As Samuel lay in the temple, the lamp of God had not yet gone out; sunrise was still some hours away. An earthenware vessel filled with oil, the flame spread its light and cast shadows around the room of the temple. A scene of light and darkness, movement and stillness, this was a liminal space, a boundary between earth and heaven, time and eternity. In this ancient story, it is not incidental that the eyesight of the priest Eli was failing. In Scripture, blindness often means more than a mere physical deterioration; it is spiritual blindness. Perhaps the priest was no longer open to the possibility of seeing the Divine. By contrast, it seems that Samuel's heart and mind were open to

Mystery, to the elusive Presence of the Eternal, as he lay down in the temple, and served faithfully in the tabernacle day after day. In the dark silence, in his soul, Samuel heard the voice of the Sacred. He replied, 'Speak, for your servant is listening'.

In the Hebraic storytelling of the Tanakh, with its vivid anthropomorphic language, we are led in meditation into the company of Samuel, into the room housing the Ark and, ultimately, into the mystical Presence of the Holy One. In speaking of his own life experience, Bernard of Clairvaux said:

However often he comes, I have never been aware of the movement of his coming. I have known he was there; I have remembered his presence afterward; sometimes I had an inkling that he was coming. But I never felt it, nor his leaving me.....He did not enter by the eyes, for he has no colour; nor by the ears, for he has made no sound; nor by the nostrils, for he is not mingled with the air.....

For Bernard, encounter with Eternity was an awareness, a spiritual sensation, and an openness of heart and mind. Samuel resting with the Ark was a symbol of his closeness to God and his lying down a symbol of the peace, the shalom, the young boy had found in God's

intimate Presence. The distinguished Glasgow minister, the late George Morrison of Wellington Church, said:

It is in the soul within us, in the hidden sanctuary, in the silence and secret of the human heart that the union which is true blessedness is won, and the vision is granted which is peace.

God may be encountered along myriad different paths. Many people encounter the Numinous through music: for some it will be the transporting liturgy of the *Sanctus* in J S Bach's *Mass in B Minor*; for others, the majestic hymns of Charles Wesley; and others again the haunting melody of unaccompanied metrical psalms or the glories of a pipe organ. The ritual of music can uplift us, make us stronger and lead to moments of joy, even bliss. Through musical composition, we can taste the Transcendent. After St Paul, the most influential Christian thinker is the fourth century theologian St Augustine of Hippo. Augustine said that his faith was distilled into his heart while listening to hymns. Augustine spoke of a light, a voice, a perfume, and an embrace in the inner self: something quite intangible, ethereal, elusive and yet persuasive and all-consuming.

God may be encountered through darkness. Throughout Scripture, there are many times a life is changed, touched by the Divine in darkness. Darkness may be a physical reality, an absence of light, or a spiritual state of being. It may be an overwhelming, life-diminishing experience of suffering or perhaps a painful and seemingly fruitless search for God. In the mystical tradition of Christianity, darkness can be the deliberate abandonment of our familiar and comforting images, theologies and feelings about God. We can be at sea when we realise that every image, theology or feeling about God is itself not God. Resting in the darkness, as Samuel did, is perhaps a symbol of the most profound spiritual encounter: it is a tentative, intuitive reaching beyond what the rational mind can grasp. So, perhaps, the light and darkness in the temple, in the Presence of God, reflect the experiences of light and darkness in our own lives.

In his exquisite poem, *The Night*, the seventeenth century poet Henry Vaughan reimagines the encounter of Nicodemus with Christ under the cover of darkness. For Vaughan, darkness was ‘that sacred veil’

under which Wise Nicodemus ‘Did at midnight speak with the Sun!’
It was at ‘that dead and silent hour’ in the soul’s ‘calm retreat, Which
none disturb...God’s silent, searching flight’ is made. Vaughan
closes his poetic dream:

There is in God, some say,
A deep but dazzling darkness, as men here
Say it is late and dusky, because they
See not all clear.
O for that night! where I in Him
Might live invisible and dim!

For Vaughan, his vision of ecstasy is to live in the dazzling darkness
of God. In Psalm 139, the psalmist assures us that, whatever the
darkness may be in our lives, darkness is not dark to God. There is
no place in all creation, never a time, whatever we think and however
we feel, when God would abandon us. We are treasured: God’s eyes
beheld us in the womb, from unformed substance, when in secret we
were made.

Scripture is nourishment for the soul. Take yourself into that room
with Samuel. Be aware of Eternity’s embrace. Let God lift your

soul. Rise up, as Samuel did. Is that rising up not a hint of new life, of resurrection? In the darkness, we are born again.

Amen.