



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on Sunday 17 January 2021

Readings: John 1.43-51; I Samuel 3.1-10

Daily life can be straightforward and pleasant; maybe delightful; perhaps even wonderful. When it is, we do well to enjoy its blessings; if possible, to share them with others, and give thanks. Daily life can also face us with conundrums – difficult issues to weigh and decisions to make. When that it is the case, we do well to explore our options diligently, carefully, thoroughly, and, where possible, without undue haste or recklessness.

The conundrum might be rather personal –

- how shall I develop my career?
- should I take my most intimate relationship to a new level of commitment, or, perhaps, bring it to an end?
- where can wisdom be found for making courageous and caring decisions regarding my partner, parent or child as they become dependent?
- what's the right reaction when asked to act unethically in my workplace?

The conundrum may be about things less personal –

- how do I cast my vote?
- in what ways should my lifestyle respond to the climate crisis and to the coronavirus pandemic?
- what do other people's needs require of me, be they emotional, material or spiritual?
- how shall we determine the direction and dynamic of Downing Place Church as we emerge from both the redevelopment and the pandemic?

Faced with these conundrums – or do you prefer conundra? – there may be much for us to learn from today's two readings. Each in their own way is about listening for God's word and guidance. Samuel thinks he is hearing the aging priest, Eli, but it turns out to be the Lord, and Eli's role is not to be a messenger himself, but to urge Samuel to listen to God's message. Philip's suggestion that inquisitive Nathanael 'come and see' Jesus is actually less about encouraging him to look than to listen for what the itinerant rabbi has to say. The Fourth Gospel is using this encounter as a vehicle for getting over a word of unprecedented revelation and truth, rooted in ancient ideas but redolent with hope for the future. By listening, Nathanael learns – and remember he's the archetypal pious Jew - that Jesus is the Messiah, and the image of heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending suggests the renewal of contact between heaven and earth. Only by listening to Jesus can Nathanael begin to scale these heights of theological discovery. It's illustrative of how vital listening is if we wish to find the answer to life's conundra.

These two stories also illustrate how listening is an active thing. Samuel has to ask the Lord to speak; Nathanael has to 'come and see'. Of course, there *are* things that we hear without trying,

like last week's sonic boom when jets were scrambled from the RAF Coningsby to intercept a plane which had lost communications. That just hit us, and made our homes shake, into the bargain. But the real difference between hearing and listening is that listening is a deliberate act. We set out to listen because we want to learn, to discern. Faced with our conundrums the Christian faith suggests that Samuel's and Nathanael's determined listening is how we best address them: listening for God's word or prompt.

This is not entirely easy. We can't turn on a switch and hey presto, there is the voice of God. Sometimes there is 'the sound of sheer silence' without the 'still small voice of calm'. Indeed, different people will listen for God, and sense they are hearing God, in very varying ways. Our three speakers have talked of how in their listening for God there is a place for nudges and whispers, for distractions, with curtains and eyes open, a place for music, a place for words from the Bible and from other people. And those three contributions were not meant to say that their ideas are the only way to listen for God, but precisely to illustrate that it will be different for each of us. And that we won't always hear anything at all. There is not a right way for us to listen, at least not the same right way for us all. But Eli's word to Samuel is still a wise word. Each of us is invited, in our own words, to seek God in our conundrums by praying 'Speak, Lord, for your servant in listening.'

That then requires patience and time. The Samuel narrative we heard is the very beginning of an important strand of the Hebrew Scriptures. Through the long story of Samuel's prophetic and priestly ministry, he is all the time listening for God as he leads the people from the era of the judges into the monarchy of Saul and then of David; from what has been called 'a marginal company of tribes' into 'a centralised state'.

So, listening for God is not a passive thing, but a deliberate, active one; it's not one-off, but habitual, a lifestyle. I believe that part of the Church's vocation is to listen for God's word to our world, and then to be willing to voice it, not least if we discern in our nations that division which augurs an alarming trend towards becoming once more a marginal company of tribes, rather than a coherent and harmonious community. Particularly when we are convinced there is unjust or unethical behaviour we have prophetic role, but we dare not express it without that prayerful listening for God's word amongst the cacophony of misleading voices that history shows can divert whole cultures from the common good.

And as Downing Place Church prepares to re-occupy its premises, this listening is vital for us, too. Why is God offering us this gift? To what response is God calling us as we are embraced by the saving grace we preach? Some of our early visions three or four years ago need to be re-examined, as we follow through the disappointment of the Pioneer Ministry and of not yet being able to partner with Westminster College in the creation of a vocational community of younger people. Both those projects are in considerable measure thwarted by the pandemic. Now we need to re-group, to re-imagine, and that has to be rooted in listening for God – in the nudges and whispers, the distractions, the music, and the words of Scripture and of people who come from places as unlikely as Nazareth. Let's do so, never listening to anything more than the glorious Gospel of the blessed God, that 'the Lord God omnipotent reigneth.

The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord, and of his Christ.