

You called me: here I am
1 Samuel 3:5

Israel had been under the yoke of the Philistines for a considerable period and during that time their spiritual leader had been Samuel, one of the noble figures of the Old Testament, a judge, a counsellor. Only once did Samuel lead the Israelites into battle, at Ebenezer, and the Philistines were utterly routed. This military success ushered in the end of forty years of oppression and the beginning of decades of peace and prosperity. Samuel was Israel's judge; he set up a school of prophets; he was a statesman and reformer. It was Samuel who, against his better judgement anointed Saul as King and then, after a number of problems beset the nation, enthroned David as ruler. Samuel died as the bible says, full of years, and was mourned deeply by all his people.

But we first hear of Samuel as a young boy, probably about twelve years old. His mother was Hannah and she consecrated him, so great was her pleasure in him, to Eli in the tabernacle, as a perpetual Nazarite. That needs a bit of explaining. A Nazarite vow required of its candidate three things: to abstain from alcoholic drink, to not cut his hair and to avoid contact with a dead body. The vow usually lasted for thirty days. Actually St Paul took a Nazarite vow twice, so the Book of Acts tells us. However, there are in Scripture three examples of perpetual or life-long Nazarite vows taken, by Samson, by our Samuel and by John the Baptist.

So here is this young boy, committed by his mother to life-long holiness under the tutelage of Eli in the tabernacle at Shiloh. Eli was getting on in years. He had been exhausted coping with his scoundrel sons; and he was going deaf. But he was a kind priest and looked after Samuel well. On one particular night Eli was asleep in his usual place in the tabernacle while young Samuel slept in the temple area where the Ark of the Covenant was kept.

Now, as we remember from our own childhoods, God called to the boy and he woke and, thinking it was old Eli, perhaps wanting a drink of water, he cried out, 'Here I am. I'm coming', and scampered to where Eli was lying. 'You called me and I'm here'. And the old man rubbed his eyes and said, 'No, I didn't. You're mistaken. Go back to bed'. So Samuel did. And God called to the boy again, and again he thought it was old Eli, and again went to the old man again. 'Here I am', he said. And Eli said 'I didn't call you at all, my son. Lie down in your place'. Now Samuel had had no experience of God, and when the voice came a third time, 'Samuel!' and he ran to Eli, the old priest realised that it was the Lord calling the child. 'It's God's voice you're hearing', said Eli. 'Go back to your place and if he calls again you are to say, 'Speak, Lord; thy servant hears thee'. And Samuel went back to his bed, listening this time, and in the words of our reading this morning, 'the Lord came and stood there and called, 'Samuel, Samuel' as before'. Samuel answered, 'Speak, Lord; thy servant hears thee'.

This tale is about listening and we do well to reflect on the whole idea of listening, listening to our partners, listening to ourselves, listening to others, listening to God.

Throughout the Old Testament there are references to this listening to God. The Israelites were told not only to cherish the words of God but to listen and depend on those words for everything they needed as a nation. Listening to the word of God in the wilderness was needed if they were to survive at all. It was like manna: they needed it every day. To hear the word and respond was life to them. It echoes in the Book of Deuteronomy:

Then it shall come about because you listen to those judgements and keep and do them that the Lord your God will keep with you his covenant and his loving kindness. (Deut. 7:12).

Be careful to listen to these words which I command you so that it may be well with you and your sons after you forever (Deut. 12:28).

And there are those accounts of characters who didn't listen, like Moses and Jeroboam and Jonah and Solomon.

There's a story about a world-famous violin virtuoso who could command extraordinary ticket prices in concert halls. The night after one of his recitals he dressed in jeans and a jumper and with his Stradivarius took a place in the London Underground, a cap at his feet, and began to play as travellers passed him by. He played Bach's three partitas for unaccompanied violin. It took him nearly one and a half hours and at the end there was 68 pence in his cap. Countless dozens of people passed him in the corridor to the platform but no one was listening.

What is it that we listen for? A blackbird's song or a currawong's? A small child's giggle? The kitchen timer? Our partner's breathing in the night hours? The click of a key in the front door? There's a poem of Mary Oliver's called 'Listen' and it begins like this:

Every day
I see or hear
something
that more or less

kills me
with delight,
that leaves me
like a needle

in a haystack
of light.
It was what I was born for-
to look, to listen,

to lose myself
inside this soft world-
to instruct myself
over and over.

We principally listen, I think, to other people, but there's a problem with that. That Protestant saint (if I may call him that), Dietrich Bonhoeffer, said some people are 'half-eared'. We'll come back to Bonhoeffer later.

A man once said to his wife, 'You're the driver of a train. There are 35 people on board. At the first stop, 10 get off and 2 get on. At the next stop no one gets off but 5 get on. At the third stop, 4 get off and 2 get on. Now here's the question: What's the name of the train driver?'

'How should I know?' snapped his wife.

'See? You never listen. Right at the start I said you were the train driver'.

The University of Minnesota recently conducted a study on listening. I was interested because it's about what I used to earn my living doing, lecturing and observing students listening. The survey checked on how much the subjects remembered from a short lecture. No matter how carefully the subjects claimed they were listening, they could only remember 50 per cent of what they'd heard. After we've barely learnt something, we tend to forget from one third to a half of it within 8 hours. Two months after the listening the average listener in the study could only remember 25 per cent of what they'd heard. And it's not surprising, really. We think faster than we can talk. We think at high speed but hear words at a slow speed. What happens when we're listening is that we have spare thinking time and this can prove distracting. It's Bonhoeffer's 'half-ear'. All too often when we're listening to someone, our mind is partly on another track altogether. It's why we interrupt the

person we're listening to. We've grabbed something from our spare thinking time. To listen carefully, we have to learn to keep quiet while the other is talking. There's a perceptive observation I came across recently: if you are silent like a tree, people will shelter beneath your branches. That's a good listener.

In the current era of constant connection listening is changing its essential quality. We get interrupted more. Check your smart phone because someone may be wanting you. How can you talk to someone if they are so little interested that they check Facebook while pretending to listen? They're not listening at all. Last September the ABC's Radio National ran a little survey. They asked their audience to do without their mobile phones for a day. At the end of that period, members of the audience admitted that the most important effect was that they were able to listen to their partners. And in this competitive world, we need to be prepared to listen and having listened, to keep a still tongue. Often listeners can't keep confidences. They are pleased to know something that other people don't know and pass it on to somebody else, thinking it's giving them an edge somehow. Life isn't easy for families at present in this period of rapid change in society; people living alone as well as couples need someone they trust to listen to them.

Listening is more of a problem when it involves two people who know each other well. What husband or wife hasn't mumbled 'Uh huh' to the other but paying no attention. I'm really bad at this myself. I'm reading the sports pages of the newspaper and Dorothy is reading the overseas news and reads a paragraph out to me and I don't hear it. I'm not listening- I owe her the dignity of paying attention. But perhaps the worst thing is listening with your mind already made up.

I said we'd get back to Bonhoeffer. Here he is in his book *Life Together*:

'The first service one owes to others in our community involves listening to the other. Just as our love for God begins with listening to God's word, the beginning of love for other Christians is learning to listen to them. God's love for us is shown by the fact that God not only gives us God's word but also lends us God's ear. We do God's work for our brothers and sisters when we learn to listen to them. So often Christians...think their only service is to have to 'offer' something when they are with other people. They forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking...But Christians who can no longer listen to one another will soon no longer be listening to God, either: they will always be talking even in the presence of God.'

Now that's pretty frank and up-front. Learning to listen to our friends in our church community: not about where they are going for their holidays or what book they are reading at the moment. How true it is, especially in non-conformist churches, that we've been taught to, have learned to give to others. Now what about listening?

It takes patience, of course. People we're talking intimately with rarely come out directly with what's concerning them; they rarely begin with what's most important. Impatient, inattentive listening is worse than not listening at all. Our listening attention is often distracted by external surroundings or the drift of the conversation turning on to oneself.

Good listening is an act of love. Love is kind, Paul tells us; love is never boastful or rude, doesn't gloat over the other's shortcomings. So it is with listening. Reckon others, says Paul, of more importance than yourselves.

Good listening may well prompt perceptive questioning on the part of the listener. The Book of Proverbs gets it: 'counsel in another's heart is like deep water, but a discerning listener will draw it up.' There's no point in asking questions that only require a yes or no answer. Be discerning.

It follows then that good listening is ministry. As we've heard Bonhoeffer say, listening can be a greater service than speaking. We are required therefore to listen seriously. What our neighbour in our community, whether it be the larger community of our suburb and our street or the believing community that gathers here Sunday by Sunday, what our neighbour needs most is for someone to know. We've all experienced the sense of relief we've had when we've shared our tensions or our fears with someone else whom we trust.

And good listening reflects our relationship with God. As Bonhoeffer put it, 'Christians who can no longer listen to one another will soon no longer be listening to God, either'. Good listening is a means of grace among believers and those they listen to. Though he didn't at first realise it, young Samuel had been listening to God, and he went on listening all his life. As the chapter from which our text comes this morning reaches a close, we read: 'As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him, and none of his words went unfulfilled, from Dan to Beersheba'.

In my early twenties, I learned a technique for listening intently from the then tribal people in the desert north-west of Alice Springs. When hunting, the Ngalia men, believing they'd sensed the movement of a kangaroo, would open their mouths to listen. They had learned that with their mouths opened, it intensified the acuteness of their listening. It was a hunter-gatherer trick. We don't have a trick like that, but we do have at our disposal an act of will to sharpen our listening.

In the 8th chapter of Luke's gospel we are given the parable of the sower and Jesus' explanation of it to the disciples. Then Jesus tells the little story about not hiding a lamp under the bed but putting it on a lampstand so that it gave light to all the room. And as he rounds off the story, Jesus says, 'Take care, then, how you listen'.

Dr Ian Hansen. 14 January 2018