

Some thoughts on the Lectionary Readings for Year B – Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time (2nd Service)

Lectionary Readings: **1 Samuel 3: 1-20**
 Psalm 34: 1-10, (11-22)
 1 Corinthians 14: 12-20
 Matthew 13: 10-17

The Old Testament reading this week is the well known story of the Lord calling Samuel. We remember the family history of Samuel, how a young boy came to be living and serving in the ‘Temple’ or ‘Tabernacle’. This was the central place of worship and in 1 Samuel 1 we read that it was located at Shiloh. (The first permanent Temple was built much, much, later in the reign of Solomon; David’s son.)

Every year Elkanah would go up to Shiloh to sacrifice to the Lord, accompanied by his two wives. Peninah had borne him sons and daughters but Hannah had produced no offspring. Chapter 1 makes it clear that Elkanah had great affection for Hannah but Peninah taunted her because she had no children.

Hannah, ‘*in bitterness of spirit*’ pours out her agony to the Lord, accompanied by much weeping. She vows that if the Lord will give her a son he will be returned to the Lord, to serve Him all his days.

Her agony is observed by Eli, sitting by the door into the Tabernacle. Seeing lips moving but hearing no sound he makes an incorrect assumption and accuses Hannah of being drunk. The footnote in the NIV Study Bible suggests that:

“Eli’s mistake suggests that in those days it was not uncommon for drunken people to enter the sanctuary. Further evidence of the religious and moral deterioration of the time is found in the stories of Judges: chapters 17-21.”

This comment is reflected in the first verse of our reading:

The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli. **In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions.**

When Hannah pours out her heart to Eli he realises his mistake and she leaves with a blessing:

Eli answered, ‘Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him.’

Elkanah and Hannah return home and her prayer is answered:

²⁰ So in the course of time Hannah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, saying, ‘Because I asked the LORD for him.’
(An NIV footnote tells us that *Samuel* sounds like the Hebrew for *Heard of God*.)

Hannah did not accompany her husband when he went to Shiloh the next year but stayed at home with the very young Samuel, making a promise however that when he was weaned she would take him to Shiloh and present him to the Lord:

²⁴ After he was weaned, she took the boy with her, young as he was, along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour and a skin of wine, and brought him to the house of the LORD at Shiloh. ²⁵ When the bull had been sacrificed, they brought the boy to Eli, ²⁶ and she said to him, ‘Pardon me, my lord. As surely as you live, I am the woman who stood here beside you praying to the LORD. ²⁷ I prayed for this child, and the LORD has granted me what I asked of him. ²⁸ So now I give him to the LORD. For his whole life he shall be given over to the LORD.’
And he worshipped the LORD there.

In chapter 2 we read of the corrupt sons of Eli – the priests at Shiloh (there is a link to the prophecy against the House of Eli – verses 27-36 - and also the conclusion of the Call of Samuel, when he passes on the Lord’s message to the old priest):

²² Now Eli, who was very old, heard about everything his sons were doing to all Israel and how they slept with the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting. ²³ So he said to them, ‘Why do you do such things? I hear from all the people about these wicked deeds of yours. ²⁴ No, my sons; the report I hear spreading among the LORD’s people is not good. ²⁵ If one person sins against another, God may mediate for the offender; but if anyone sins against the LORD, who will intercede for them?’ His sons, however, did not listen to their father’s rebuke, for it was the LORD’s will to put them to death.

On the positive side the chapter also refers to Samuel ministering before the Lord:

¹⁸ But Samuel was ministering before the LORD – a boy wearing a linen ephod. ¹⁹ Each year his mother made him a little robe and took it to him when she went up with her husband to offer the annual sacrifice.
²⁰ Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife, saying, ‘May the LORD give you children by this woman to take the place of the one she prayed for and gave to the LORD.’ Then they would go home.
²¹ And the LORD was gracious to Hannah; she gave birth to three sons and two daughters. Meanwhile, the boy Samuel grew up in the presence of the LORD.

The account of Samuel being called by the Lord, in our reading today, is straightforward. It may however trigger some relevant questions for each of us.

Do we see ourselves as still living in days when the Word of the Lord is rare?

Are we prepared to believe that the Lord is waiting for an opportunity to speak to His followers?

Are we open to the Word of the Lord? – do we recognise when He speaks to us?

Is there a friend or relative who, like Eli, can see that God is speaking to us and encourage us to listen to His Word?

Do we have the courage to share a 'difficult' Word from the Lord?

We leave this reading as we are reminded of its final words (and the life of service that Samuel gave to the Lord):

¹⁹ The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground.

²⁰ And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognised that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the LORD.

Psalm 34 has an interesting heading:

Of David. When he pretended to be insane before Abimelek, who drove him away, and he left.

A search through a comprehensive concordance for Abimelek fails to find any reference to this event. Dr. G.A.F. Knight in Psalms (Volume 1) of the Daily Study Bible (an OT sequel to the famous NT series by Professor William Barclay) comments:

As far as we know the psalm headings in the Psalter were added in the period of the Second Temple. Someone has evidently made the suggestion that this psalm would fit the period when David was serving as a mercenary soldier in the Philistine city of Gath. But this heading employs a word which was rare in David's day yet which was in general use in the late period of the OT. But then, as we in our turn read the psalm, we find that it also fits a still later period – ours! Throughout the Middle Ages, in the days before the Reformation, Psalm 34 was used as a Proper Psalm (*a Psalm used only on a particular day or feast*) for Holy Communion, as well as during Passion Week. Martin Luther kept it in those places in the liturgy in his reformed service.

There is Scriptural Evidence of David employing the 'madness' strategy while fleeing from Saul: (1 Samuel 21)

David at Gath

¹⁰ That day David fled from Saul and went to Achish king of Gath. ¹¹ But the servants of Achish said to him, 'Isn't this David, the king of the land? Isn't he the one they sing about in their dances:

"Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands"?'

¹² David took these words to heart and was very much afraid of Achish king of Gath. ¹³ **So he feigned insanity** in their presence; and while he was in their hands he acted like a madman, making marks on the doors of the gate and letting saliva run down his beard.

¹⁴ Achish said to his servants, 'Look at the man! He is insane! Why bring him to me? ¹⁵ Am I so short of madmen that you have to bring this fellow here to carry on like this in front of me? Must this man come into my house?'

Several commentators place Psalm 34 as a "*Wisdom Psalm*" and also as a "*Teaching Psalm*". It is once again in the form of an 'acrostic' – the first verse beginning with *Aleph* the second with *Beth* (the first two letters of the Hebrew alphabet) and so on. This would have been an 'aide memoir' for students learning the Psalm by heart.

Dr. Knight, in the Daily Study Bible has this analysis of the Psalm:

Today the psalm can be suitably presented in a classroom by employing dialogue form. The following division of the text has been suggested: verses 1-3 one child speaks;

¹ I will extol the LORD at all times; his praise will always be on my lips.

² I will glory in the LORD; let the afflicted hear and rejoice.

³ Glorify the LORD with me: let us exalt his name together.

verses 4-7 another answers;

⁴ I sought the LORD, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears.

⁵ Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame.

⁶ This poor man called, and the LORD heard him; he saved him out of all his troubles.

⁷ The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them.

verses 8-10 a third speaks;

⁸ Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.

⁹ Fear the LORD, you his holy people, for those who fear him lack nothing.

¹⁰ The lions may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.

verses 11-14 the teacher interrupts;

¹¹ Come, my children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD.

¹² Whoever of you loves life and desires to see many good days,

¹³ keep your tongue from evil and your lips from telling lies.

¹⁴ Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.

verses 15-18, and verses 19-22 - two other speakers contribute to the dialogue.

¹⁵ The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, and his ears are attentive to their cry;

¹⁶ but the face of the LORD is against those who do evil, to blot out their name from the earth.

¹⁷ The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles.

¹⁸ The LORD is close to the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

¹⁹ The righteous person may have many troubles, but the LORD delivers him from them all;

²⁰ he protects all his bones, not one of them will be broken.

²¹ Evil will slay the wicked; the foes of the righteous will be condemned.

²² The LORD will rescue his servants; no one who takes refuge in him will be condemned.

This is a Psalm of confidence in the Lord, especially in times of danger, hardship and difficulty such as David experienced at Gath.

Verse 8 encourages us to experience the Lord – *“Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.”*

Charles Wesley pens in verse 4 of “Jesus – the name high over all”:

**O that the world might taste and see
The riches of his grace!**
The arms of love that compass me
Would all mankind embrace

Turning to the Index of Biblical Texts in Hymns and Psalms we find the compilers of the hymn book have also linked Psalm 34: 8 to verse 3 of John Greenleaf Whittier’s hymn “Who fathoms the eternal thought?”

Yet, in the maddening maze of things,
And tossed by storm and flood,
To one fixed stake my spirit clings;
I know that God is good!

The final link of a hymn to verse 8 of the Psalm reminds us of our confidence in the Lord:

This, this is the God we adore, Our faithful, unchangeable friend, Whose love is as great as his power, And neither knows measure nor end:	‘Tis Jesus, the first and the last, Whose Spirit shall guide us safe home; We’ll praise him for all that is past, And trust him for all that’s to come.
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Joseph Hart

Our Epistle comes from Paul’s first letter to the Christians at Corinth. When we think of this ‘book’ I suppose thoughts first go to chapter 13 - Paul’s ‘purple patch’ on Love; the greatest of the Trio of Faith, Hope and Love.

This short passage is sandwiched between two chapters which give detail of Spiritual Gifts.

We remember, in Galatians Paul describes the **“Fruit of the Spirit”**:

¹⁶ So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

¹⁹ The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰ idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹ and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

²² **But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control.** Against such things there is no law. ²⁴ Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. ²⁶ Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

It would appear that Paul is marking each of these ‘Fruits’ as a characteristic of a Christian – states of mind and actions that are common to all Christians. Some of you may have heard me refer to these as the ‘Hallmarks’ of a Christian – the marks that reveal the item as genuine.

In 1 Corinthians 14 there is reference to **“Gifts of the Spirit”**. It is evident that the Corinthians are anxious for these ‘Gifts’:

¹² So it is with you. Since you are eager for gifts of the Spirit, try to excel in those that build up the church.

Gifts to build up the Church – these were spelled out in detail in chapter 12 and include some ‘Gifts’ that, perhaps, make us feel uncomfortable. The ‘Gifts’ in question are different to each other but given by the same Spirit:

⁴ **There are different kinds of gifts**, but the same Spirit distributes them. ⁵ There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. ⁶ There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.

⁷ Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. ⁸ **To one** there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, **to another** a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, ⁹ **to another** faith by the same Spirit, **to another** gifts of healing by that one Spirit, ¹⁰ **to another** miraculous powers, **to another** prophecy, **to another** distinguishing between spirits, **to another** speaking in different kinds of tongues, and **to still another** the interpretation of tongues.

¹¹ **All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.**

Paul likens the ‘Gifts’ which have been received as the equivalent to parts to the body – each has its own specific purpose. Unlike the ‘Fruits’ mentioned earlier it is clear that only selected, specific ‘Gifts’ will be given to any one individual.

The most dramatic, and earnestly desired, ‘Gift’ given to Christians today is probably ‘Speaking in Tongues’.

It would appear that this might also have been the case in Corinth! Paul clearly had this ‘Gift’ but our Bible passage shows he clearly knew when to use it and when it would be more of a hindrance than a blessing:

¹⁸ I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you.

¹⁹ But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.

We remember that ‘Gifts’ are given to build up the body of the Church.

Are we open to what God wants to give each one of us? We remember what Paul says at the end of 1 Corinthians 12:

²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. ²⁸ And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues.

²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰ Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?

³¹ **Now eagerly desire the greater gifts.**

The content of the reading from Matthew’s Gospel is unexpected! The chapter starts with Jesus going to the lake-side to preach and teach but the press of the crowd is so great he gets into a boat, presumably anchors just off-shore and teaches from there. The Gospel tells us that He told them many things in parables, one of which is recorded:

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake.

² Such large crowds gathered round him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore.

³ Then he told them many things in parables, saying: ‘A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴ As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵ Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶ But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. ⁸ Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop – a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.

⁹ **Whoever has ears, let them hear.’**

This last verse leads us into the question asked of Jesus by the disciples – “*Why do you speak to the people in parables?*”

The reply, in the NIV translation, seems to imply that the disciples are a select band with insight which the crowd do not have; and furthermore, listening to Jesus they will still not gain that insight:

¹⁰ The disciples came to him and asked, ‘Why do you speak to the people in parables?’

¹¹ He replied, ‘Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. ¹² Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. ¹³ This is why I speak to them in parables:

‘Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.

¹⁴ In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah:

“You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.

¹⁵ For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.”

¹⁶ But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. ¹⁷ For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.

Musing over this passage, I asked my wife to cast her eyes over it.

She commented that it was one of those ‘controversial’ passages – it almost suggested a Calvinistic Theology of the ‘Elect’.

I then wondered how “**The Message**” might paraphrase the same passage:

Why Tell Stories?

¹⁰ The disciples came up and asked, “Why do you tell stories?”

¹¹⁻¹⁵ He replied, “You’ve been given insight into God’s kingdom. You know how it works. Not everybody has this gift, this insight; it hasn’t been given to them. Whenever someone has a ready heart for this, the insights and understandings flow freely. But if there is no readiness, any trace of receptivity soon disappears. That’s why I tell stories: to create readiness, to nudge the people toward a welcome awakening. In their present state they can stare till doomsday and not see it, listen till they’re blue in the face and not get it. I don’t want Isaiah’s forecast repeated all over again:

Your ears are open but you don’t hear a thing. Your eyes are awake but you don’t see a thing.

The people are stupid! They stick their fingers in their ears so they won’t have to listen;

They screw their eyes shut so they won’t have to look, so they won’t have to deal with me

face-to-face and let me heal them.

¹⁶⁻¹⁷ “But you have God-blessed eyes—eyes that see! And God-blessed ears—ears that hear! A lot of people, prophets and humble believers among them, would have given anything to see what you are seeing, to hear what you are hearing, but never had the chance.

The authors would appear to have ‘dodged’ round some of the disturbing points in other translations and presented a more ‘evangelical- outreach’ gospel.

J.B. Phillips (translation or paraphrase?) appears to be closer to the standard text but suggests Jesus continuing to teach in parables **because** of the lack of understanding of the crowd – in the hope that the ‘penny will drop’?

¹⁰ At this the disciples approached him and asked, “Why do you talk to them in parables?”

¹¹⁻¹⁵ “Because you have been given the chance to understand the secrets of the kingdom of Heaven,” replied Jesus, “but they have not. For when a man has something, more is given to him till he has plenty. But if he has nothing even his nothing will be taken away from him. This is why I speak to them in these parables; because they go through life with their eyes open, but see nothing, and with their ears open, but understand nothing of what they hear.

They are the living fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy which says: 'Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, and seeing you will see and not perceive; for the heart of this people has grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, lest they should understand with their heart and turn, so that I should heal them'.

¹⁶⁻¹⁷ "But how fortunate you are to have eyes that see and ears that hear! Believe me, a great many prophets and good men have longed to see what you are seeing and they never saw it. Yes, and they longed to hear what you are hearing and they never heard it.

The question still hangs in the air – did Jesus continue to teach in parables knowing the crowd would never understand or did he hope to gradually 'nudge' some insight into the meaning?

If we continue to read from verse 18 we find Jesus explaining (apparently to His disciples) the meaning of the 'parable of the Sower':

¹⁸ 'Listen then to what the parable of the sower means:

¹⁹ when anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. ²⁰ The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. ²¹ But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. ²² The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. ²³ But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.'

(NIV)

I wonder how much insight we have into all the intricacies of the parables given by Jesus? – Let us pray for enlightenment.

What shall we offer our good Lord,
Poor nothings, for his boundless grace?
Fain would we his great name record
And worthy set forth his praise.

Great object of our growing love,
To whom our more than all we owe,
Open the fountain from above,
And let it our full souls o'erflow.

So shall our lives thy power proclaim,
Thy grace for every sinner free;
Till all the world shall learn thy name,
Shall all stretch out their hands to thee.

Open a door which earth and hell
May strive to shut, but strive in vain;
Let thy word richly in us dwell,
And let our gracious fruit remain.

**O multiply the sower's seed!
And fruit we every hour shall bear,
Throughout the world thy gospel spread,
Thy everlasting truth declare.**

August Gottlieb Spangenburg

Translated by John Wesley