

Tonbridge Methodist Church January 17th 2021

Listening to God

Service prepared by the Revd Jonathan Todd

Call to Worship

You are a God who gives to us:
and we thank you.

You are a God who understands us:
and we thank you.

You are a God who always loves us:
and we have come to worship you today.



StF 125 Hail to the Lord's anointed

James Montgomery

Hail to the Lord's Anointed,
great David's greater Son!
Hail, in the time appointed,
his reign on earth begun!
He comes to break oppression,
to set the captive free,
to take away transgression,
and rule in equity.

He comes, with succour
speedy,
to those who suffer wrong;
to help the poor and needy,
and bid the weak be strong;
to give them songs for sighing,
their darkness turn to light,
whose souls, condemned and
dying,
are precious in his sight.

Kings shall fall down before
him,
and gold and incense bring;
all nations shall adore him,
his praise all people sing;
to him shall prayer unceasing
and daily vows ascend,
his kingdom still increasing,
a kingdom without end.

O'er every foe victorious,
he on his throne shall rest;
from age to age more glorious,
all-blessing and all-blest.
The tide of time shall never
his covenant remove;
his name shall stand for ever,
his changeless name of Love.

Opening prayer - including hymn *Come and find the quiet centre*

Living God, your name is indeed Love. We rejoice in all the love we share together; we rejoice in the love and care we have received from those around us - those kind thoughts, comments or gestures

that have helped us get through another difficult week. And we rejoice that at the heart of it all, there you are.

We are so limited in what we can do at the moment. In some ways many of us have time on our hands; but in others we know just getting through the day can be hard. Yet, amidst all that is going on, we know you are there. And so we remind ourselves of your presence - here and now - wherever we might be.

**Come and find the
quiet centre
in the crowded life we lead,
find the room for
hope to enter,
find the space where
we are freed:
clear the chaos
and the clutter,
clear our eyes,
that we can see
all the things that
really matter,
be at peace,
and simply be.**

**Silence is a friend
who claims us,
cools the heat
and slows the pace;
God it is who speaks
and names us,
knows our being,
touches base,
making space
within our thinking,
lifting shades to
show the sun,
raising courage
when we're shrinking,
finding scope for faith begun.**

Yet, Lord, as we give thanks for your presence among us, as we give thanks for the ways we have been supported by your love this week, we also come to say sorry. For we know there are times when we let you, ourselves and others down. We get so caught up in our routines and our daily struggles that we fail to hear your voice. You speak in so many different ways, including through other people, but very often we take no notice and continue on our own way. Help us to tune into your voice. Open our ears, open our minds, open our hearts to you. Help us to allow your healing love to hold us and, through us, touch and support those around us.

**In the Spirit let us travel, open to each other's pain;
let our lives and fears unravel, celebrate the space we gain:
there's a place for deepest dreaming,
there's a time for hearts to care;
in the Spirit's lively scheming there is always room to spare!**

These prayers we offer in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. **Amen.**

Some years ago, Julie was listening to the radio. It was the quiz show *Counterpoint*, with which some of you may be familiar. We had missed the beginning when the contestants were introduced, but one of the contestants sounded very familiar. Not only that, he seemed to be getting all the answers right. But, try as she might, she just couldn't place him. She kept wracking her brains trying to remember who it was but it wasn't until the quizmaster mentioned his name that suddenly she realised it was someone we used to sing with regularly, and everything fell into place. But coming across his voice out of context, in an unexpected way, had totally thrown her.



Our first reading this morning is taken from the book of Samuel and is another story of someone not recognising a voice - a case of not expecting the speaker to be in this particular place, at this particular time, speaking in this particular way - and thus the listener really struggles to understand what is going on.

Old Testament Reading : 1 Samuel 3: 1 - 11

How many times do we continue to miss God's voice today: because we are too preoccupied with our own concerns to pay attention; because we cannot believe God would be talking to us in that way; because we cannot believe God would want to talk to us at all; because we think God has far more important things to do than talk directly to us, regardless of the number of stories in the Bible when God speaks directly to all sorts of people in all sorts of ways. It is worth remembering that throughout the Bible God works through individuals rather than through large organisations (or even small ones, come to that). Yes, there are groups that come together, whether it is the disciples, the beginnings of the church, or even the nation of Israel. But it all begins with individual encounters, individual messages, individual responses - often to the most unlikely of people, whether that be Moses, Saul or, in this case, Samuel. And if God can call a small boy to be one of the great prophets of the Jewish people, he can certainly talk to us now, if we take the time and trouble to listen.

StF 663 I, the Lord of sea and sky

Daniel Schutte

I, the Lord of sea and sky,
I have heard my people cry.
All who dwell in dark and sin
my hand will save.
I, who made the stars of night,
I will make their darkness
bright.
Who will bear my light to them?
Whom shall I send?

*Here I am, Lord.
Is it I, Lord?
I have heard you
calling in the night.
I will go, Lord,
if you lead me.
I will hold your people
in my heart.*

I, the Lord of snow and rain,
I have borne my people's pain;
I have wept for love of them.
They turn away.
I will break their hearts of stone,
give them hearts for love alone.
I will speak my word to them.
Whom shall I send?

I, the Lord of wind and flame,
I will tend the poor and lame.
I will set a feast for them.
My hand will save.
Finest bread I will provide
till their hearts are satisfied.
I will give my life to them.
Whom shall I send?

Gospel Reading : John 1: 43 - 51

I wonder how much of our first reading you can still remember. Any good teacher will tell you that a lot of teaching is about getting feedback from the pupils in terms of what they have understood. Throughout your lesson you need to ask questions, get people to repeat back to you in their own words what they have heard, probe their understanding so that you can see how well things are being received and adapt accordingly. Without looking, can you tell me what physical disability Eli suffered from? Which part of the temple did Samuel sleep in? What musical quiz was Julie's friend appearing in? How well did you do? It may be that you got all the questions right – in which case, congratulations! It may be some of the questions took you by surprise – in which case, it is worth asking why that was.



It may be that you weren't expecting to be tested, that you hadn't considered I would be expecting you to concentrate. But, as the Lottery adverts used to remind us, "it could be you". It could always be us that God wants to talk to, at any time of day or night. And thus we should always be listening out, always keeping open the possibility that God has something important to say to us: here and now – wherever we are. And if we don't expect that, if we don't make time to listen, we may never hear what God has to say.

Another reason you may have had difficulty with the questions could have been the old adage: "familiarity breeds contempt". Most of us are very familiar with the story of Eli and Samuel. And we think "Oh, it is that story. I know that one" and perhaps not pay it the attention it deserves. "There's nothing new in that story for me". Or, as Nathanael puts it, "can anything good come out of Nazareth?". He knew Nazareth, he knew its people. He simply didn't believe anyone from that place could have anything new to say to him. It is something we do so often. We pigeonhole people, think we know what they are going to say and then stop listening. It is sadly what is leading to such a polarisation in society today, whether with Donald Trump in America or the Brexit divide here. People instantly make judgements depending on what side they think people are on and switch off. Now there may be a lot of things we disagree about and feel saddened about, whatever side of the divide we might be. But we will never heal the deep wounds that divide us if we stop listening to what the other person is saying; we will never bring people together unless we dig deeper into trying to understand why the other side are saying and doing what they are saying and doing, and what lies behind the position they now find themselves in. One of the most depressing comments I heard after the recent storming of the Capitol building was a Trump supporter saying: "Nothing will ever convince me that Joe Biden won that election." Yet we all kid ourselves if we don't recognise that there are some things we, too, can be similarly blinkered about, convinced we know best, that we are right. It is such arrogance that leads to us closing our ears and not listening.

And that is true with God, too. We can so easily create God in our own image that, when things don't fit into the current picture of God we have created, we dismiss it – even when it might be God giving us a nudge. Our understanding of the Bible inevitably grows and deepens as we get older and as we continue our spiritual journey – or, at least, it should do. How we understood things when

we were teenagers may not be how we see things now. And there is nothing wrong with that. People sometimes say that God is unchanging and the Bible contains all the truth we need to know. And that may be true. But, although God may be eternal and always God, **our** understanding can change. God continues to reveal himself to us, helping our understanding grow, continuing to move us along, even when the place we are currently in may have felt home and secure for years. As the hymn puts it “we’re a travelling, wandering race – we’re the people of God.” But this only comes about if we are prepared to be open to what God might be saying; if we continue to wrestle with scripture, even though we may have read the same stories time and again; if we are prepared to think about things differently; if we are prepared to be amazed and surprised by the way God’s love manifests itself in the world.

Finally, you may have had problems with some of the questions because you weren’t expecting any questions about the quiz show. That was just a little anecdote which wasn’t really relevant to the gospel, so you hadn’t paid it much attention. Although I might disagree about its relevance, that’s not the point. The point is you thought it wasn’t relevant so switched off. And again that happens so often. Yet it is so often in precisely those unexpected places that God speaks to us, takes us by surprise, if only we are ready to be surprised. Throughout the Bible, God chooses the unexpected: the small boy David to kill Goliath, the elderly Abraham and Sarah to parent the nation of Israel, the self-righteous Paul to spearhead the spreading of the gospel, the faltering Peter to found the church. God is never predictable and can never be pigeonholed. He may speak to you during worship on a Sunday morning. But it could be the most important thing he said to you this week was at 1.45pm on Tuesday afternoon while you were shopping in Tesco’s.

Then Eli realized that the Lord was calling the boy. So Eli told Samuel, “Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’” So Samuel went and lay down in his place. The Lord came and stood there, calling as at the other times, “Samuel! Samuel!” Then Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

Prayers

We take a moment to listen to what God might be saying to us today. If you have three candles or night lights, you might like to use them during the prayers but, if not, it doesn’t matter!

I invite you, in the quiet, to think of one person whom you know who is in need today – they may be ill, they may be sad, lonely, feeling unloved, just received bad news, anxious, homeless, frustrated by the lockdown. Just think of that one person and offer them up to God. Then think of how God may want you to help. You may think there is nothing you can do and it maybe that bringing them before God in prayer is all that you can do – but nonetheless ask God, and listen to his reply.

<*Light Candle*> Loving God, we bring before you people we know who need help. May they be supported by the touch of your love.

The Lord hears our prayer: **Thanks be to God.**

I invite you, in the quiet, to think of one person or one situation you've heard or read about in the news. It may be to do with the pandemic. But it might be something else, for the world continues with all its other problems: war, famine, disease, poverty, homelessness, loneliness, rejection. Whatever it might be, offer that situation and those involved up to God. Then think of how God may want you to help. You may think there is nothing you can do – but nonetheless ask God, and listen to his reply.

<*Light Candle*> Healing God, we bring before you those in need across the world. May your Spirit sustain and uphold them and may they be aware that there are people who care.

The Lord hears our prayer: **Thanks be to God.**

I invite you, in the quiet, to think of one person who has shown God's love to you – perhaps they have helped you out, perhaps they have comforted you when you were sad, or thought of you, or welcomed you. Offer them up to God and give thanks for them and for all those through whom we experience God's love.

<*Light Candle*> Gracious God, we give you thanks for all those through whom your love is made known. Help us to be one of those people, too. Enable us to reach out to those around us and help us to show all those we meet the love you have for them.

The Lord hears our prayer: **Thanks be to God.**



Living Lord, open our lips that we may tell the good news of your love to everyone; open our hands that we may reach out to one another, to touch and to connect; open our eyes that we may recognise Christ in the faces of people shunned and marginalised; open our ears that we may listen to the voices of those who are unheard; open our minds that we may search more honestly for the truth; open our hearts that we may live out your purpose and work for your kingdom. In the name of Christ. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer

StF 563 O Jesus, I have promised

John Ernest Bode

O Jesus, I have promised
to serve you to the end;
Lord, be for ever near me,
my master and my friend;
I shall not fear the battle
if you are by my side,
nor wander from the pathway
if you will be my guide.

O let me hear you speaking
in accents clear and still,
above the storms of passion,
the murmurs of self-will;
O speak to reassure me,
to hasten or control;
Lord, speak, and make me
listen,
O guardian of my soul.

O let me feel you near me;
the world is ever near;
I see the sights that dazzle,
the tempting sounds I hear;
my foes are ever near me,
around me, and within;
but, Jesus, now draw nearer,
and shield my soul from sin.

O Jesus, you have promised
to all who follow you,
that where you are in glory
your servant shall be too;
and, Jesus, I have promised
to serve you to the end;
O give me grace to follow
my master and my friend.



Blessing

So go now and continue on your journey.
And as you travel through the world:
May the joy of Jesus surprise you,
May the peace of Jesus flood you,
May the light of Jesus transform you,
May the touch of Jesus warm you,
May the strength of Jesus encourage you,
And may the love of Jesus hold you,
This day and for evermore. **Amen.**