

David Wilbourne's sermon for Epiphany II

The word of the Lord was rare in those days
in which God spoke to the boy Samuel.

You bet it was.

Eli,
not to be confused with Elijah or Elisha
or Eli Eli lama sabachtani,
was priest of the Shrine at Shiloh,
a veritable Harrison Ford guarding the
Ark of the Covenant.

With that terrible and terrifying Ark in your midst,
you'd expect folk to show faith some respect.

But not a bit of it.

Earlier in the story
we have barren Hannah,
mother-yet-to-be of Samuel

coming into the shrine to pray for a son.

The fact that Eli assumes she is drunk rather than praying
suggests what his general experience was.

Then as now.

John Betjeman wrote a poem,

Bristol and Clifton,

where a churchwarden is shocked

when a woman comes into church after Evensong to pray:

'Praying... ...she cannot be loyal Church of England!'

On the whole Eli has not been used to people

coming in off the streets

to fall on their knees before their Lord.

Instead he has come to expect that the Shrine of the Ark

will be used as a shelter from the sun,

a place to sleep off a hangover,

or a place from which his sons
can run their rackets –
clergy sons then as now are the dodgiest of people!
So when Eli's protégé Samuel hears God calling him,
Eli takes some convincing.
But call Samuel God does.

The lesson speaks to us at several levels.
Having a 12 year old girl read it is just perfect,
hammering home the point
that God speaks powerfully to youngsters,
and we oldies have to reckon with that.
However much we bang on about Holy Week and Easter
being more important religious festivals than Christmas,
God speaking through a baby born at Bethlehem
is the supreme image that fires the imagination
of the whole world.

I was talking to a GP recently who was having to move
from being product-led to being market-led.
No longer could he say,
'I've got healing, let me apply it to you.'
Now he has to ask folk,
'What is it you want from me?
Let me give you what you need
rather than impose what I think you need.'
Market-led.
The world gives a holy pause for Christmas,
and we in the Church ought to take note of that market fact
and adjust our product accordingly.
Here's to the child and all they can teach us.
So hurray
when we have babies, toddlers, children in church.
And anyone who thinks differently,
who thinks that children should be seen and not heard,

who thinks that every child isn't a special child,
who thinks children should be taken out,
will have me taking them out
to reckon with!

Children are there to disturb our religious complacency
as Samuel disturbed Eli's.

But what precisely did God disturb Samuel to do?
It's a complex story
in a primitive age when society and religion are raw,
yet to be codified.

It's not really an accident that Shiloh
is synonymous with the wild west frontier.

Samuel has the mark of a prophet about him,
giving Eli the bad news
that the dynasty of him
and his Del-boy sons

are doomed.

The prophecy comes true.
The Philistines ransack Shiloh,
steal the ark,
kill Eli's sons
and the shock makes Eli fall over and break his neck.

Samuel must have been shocked as well.
It takes him a while to come back because
we hear no more of him for forty years or so,
until he returns to the scene
as a tetchy fierce defender of Israel's God,
a reluctant kingmaker,
anointing tall Saul as Israel's first ever king,
but still trying to pull the strings himself.

Saul can't even sneeze without Samuel's permission.

And when Samuel tires of him
and is prompted by God to go off to Bethlehem
to anoint a replacement,
he is taught a hard lesson.

Clearly Samuel originally chose Saul
because of his outstanding physical stature.

He is about to make the same mistake
and anoint one of Jesse's warrior sons,
but God heads him off.

'Don't make the human mistake
of being fooled by outward show.

Be like me and look on the heart.'

Samuel learns his lesson,
looks on the ragged, filthy, Cinderella
of a shepherd boy's heart,
and anoints him king.

And unlike Saul,

David, my namesake, is so wildly bizarre
that he brooks no control,
and Samuel disappears into the mists of time.

Called to forecast a tragedy and closure.

Called to be a fierce defender of God.

Called to anoint the wrong king.

Called to anoint the right king,

David.

To set in motion a series of events

which a thousand years on

will enable a son of David,

the ultimate son of David,

to break history in two and save the world.

All stemming from a call in the night

which could have been written off as a bad dream.

Beware quenching a child's God-given call:

you might freeze the hand of history!

Our Gospel is a bit of a corrective to all this heady stuff.

The call of Nathaniel by

can-anything-good-come-out-of-Nazareth Jesus

in John's Gospel.

In common with Samuel's story,

there's initial confusion

about whether this can be a valid call.

There's no disciple called Nathaniel

in the other three Gospels,

instead there is one called Bartholomew,

so it may be that they are one and the same person.

Whatever, history has scant record

of what they went on to do.

As the hymn goes,

'O blessed Saint Bartholomew,

How little do we know of you.'

Unlike called Samuel,

called Nathaniel/Bartholomew

didn't leave much of a mark.

Rowan Williams says that realising

you don't have to leave a mark

can be so very liberating,

with history peppered

by I-must-leave-my-mark people

who spoil things.

'She was a woman who resolved to do good'

quipped Oscar Wilde,

'and you can tell those she did good to

by their hunted look!'

There are too many people

with hunted looks

caused by I-must-leave-my-mark people.

The only mark Christ took into eternity

were the marks of the cross,

put there by people who took their purist religion

too seriously, far too seriously.

They were so concerned with leaving

their respectable gnat of a mark

that they missed the camel of a God under their very noses.

What can we take away from our two readings?

That the God of Samuel

can call even you to do some heady things,

and that the God of Nathaniel

can call you to insignificance.

The call to shatter the world

and the call to leave it well alone

are both valid calls and need to temper each other.

I'm sure saintly Rowan Williams is not blind to the irony

that being exalted as Archbishop of Canterbury

has given him the stage to tell people

to resist the temptation to leave their mark!

Maybe when we're being world-shattering

we Samuels need to hear God whispering in our ear,

'Look, my child,

you don't have to leave your hand-print on the wall

to win favour with me.

I love you whatever.'

And maybe when we Nathaniels are being couch potatoes

we need to hear God whispering in our ear,

'Look my child,

don't sit it out

when the power of a million Hiroshimas

is at your disposal!'