**Samuel a prophet**  20/2/22 dkm

Read: Hebrews 12:1-17, 1Samuel 3,

Text: 1Samuel 3:10-21

Psalms: 111, 19:7-14, 119:129-136, 72old

If you enter any old Presbyterian church you will find the pulpit at the centre of the stage; in some there is a flight of stairs going up to the pulpit. This is because the Reformers saw the preaching of the word of God as the central focus of worship. Contrast, if you will, churches that have pulpits to the side of a central table or altar; their focus is on the sacraments. Or contrast churches in which the central place is occupied by drums and guitars; their focus is on music and songs rather than the preached word. The question arises, ‘What do you come to church to see or hear?’ There were of course, people who followed Jesus, ‘not because you saw signs but because you ate of the loaves and were filled’ (John 6:26).

If you do come to listen to a sermon, what do you want to hear? Are you looking for words of comfort, words of reassurance, words about God’s love, or words of truth? These are not mutually exclusive of course, but words of truth may be words of discipline or judgment. ‘The word of God is living and powerful, sharper than a two-edged sword… a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart’ (Heb 4:12). Are you ready to listen to such a word?

The very first words of the young prophet called Samuel were words of judgment. The last of the OT prophets, John the Baptist, cried out, ‘Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee the coming wrath’ (Luke 3:7). Jesus began his ministry reading Scripture and preaching, ‘Today this Scripture is fulfilled on your hearing’ (Luke 4:21); he preached judgment, and was thrown out of town. I am not looking to be thrown out of town but I do seek to preach the truth, whether it be a word of hope and comfort, or a word of judgment. Because God’s word is truth I preach his word, not selectively but line by line because every word is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness (2Tim 3:16).

Samuel’s mother gave him to the Lord when he was weaned. He grew up in the house of God at Shiloh, with Eli the priest as his *de facto* father. He grew up seeing Eli’s sons disobeying the written word of God at every turn: disobeying their father, committing adultery, and stealing the Lord’s portion of the sacrifices. They did not teach the people the word of God as priests should because they did not know the Lord.

This chapter began with the solemn declaration: ‘The word of the Lord was rare in those days’ (3:1). We have heard the wonderful story of the Lord calling young Samuel, and of Samuel eventually saying, ‘Speak Lord, for your servant hears’ (3:10). The Lord spoke to Samuel ear-tingling words. Our second subheading is, ‘Samuel speaks to Eli’ and our third, ‘Samuel a prophet’.

**1. Speak Lord, for your servant hears**

Hearing a voice calling his name in the early hours of the morning, Samuel got up and ran to Eli saying, ‘Here I am’. The third time this happened, Eli told Samuel that if he heard the voice again he should say, ‘Speak Lord, for your servant hears’ (3:9). This Samuel did, and the Lord spoke to Samuel there in the tent of meeting at Shiloh.

After many years the Lord was again speaking to his people, or to Samuel at least. The Lord had stopped speaking to them through a prophet in the period of the Judges, a period when everyone ‘did what was right in his own eyes’. This sounds a bit like the days in which we live, does it not? From a young age, people have heard, ‘Be what you want to be, do what you want to do, Yea’- and look at the outcome! ‘Truth’, as the prophet Isaiah said, ‘has fallen in the street’ (Isa 59:14). Is the word of God being preached today? And who is listening? Will not our generation be held accountable by the Lord, just as the people of Samuel’s generation, and indeed of Isaiah’s and Jeremiah’s generation were held accountable?

When the Lord spoke to Samuel, what did he say? It was indeed a prophetic word, a revelation about what would soon happen in the land, or more precisely, what the Lord was about to do with Eli’s family. Everyone wants to know the future, and there is no shortage of people ready to tell the future, be it a man sitting by the roadside with a parrot ready to hop on a set of cards, or a person sitting by their computer extrapolating lines, as they see fit, decades into future. They can tell you what the temperature will be in thirty years, even if they can’t tell you what it will be next week! Economists predict what the interest rates will be next year because people want to know this, but they change the numbers week by week. No one it seems, bothers to check if their predictions ever come true.

People do not want to hear what God says about the future in the Bible, despite the fact that every word of God has come true, and will come true. God tells us what will come to pass so that we can prepare by repenting and believing in Jesus. Ditching your petrol car for an electric one will not save you!

The Lord revealed to Samuel, who was just a youth, a message that would make ‘both ears of everyone who hears it tingle’ (3:11). The message was one of judgment upon the house of Eli (3:12). Eli was at this time the leader of Israel. The people would soon be asking for a king, but at this time Eli was the leader. So this message of divine judgment upon Eli and his family would shock the nation. The people were very disappointed in Eli and his sons of course, but what God planned for them was still shocking news.

A man of God had come to Eli to declare that both his wicked sons were about to die on the same day (2:34), and that Eli’s line would be cut off from the priesthood. This prophecy came true of course (4:11). But before it came true, it was also revealed to Samuel. God’s revelation to Samuel was the same as that of the man of God who came to Eli, so Eli would not be in a positon to question Samuel’s words.

Shortly before Samuel was due to get up and open the doors of the house of the Lord, the Lord spoke to him saying that he had already told Eli that God would judge him and his family, and why. As we know, and as the people knew, and as the Lord knew, the two sons of Eli had ‘made themselves vile, and he did not restrain them’ (4:13). Furthermore, there was no possibility of atonement ‘by sacrifice or offering forever’ (3:14). Their sin were presumptuous, amounting to blasphemy against the Lord and his holy name. Presumptuous sin was punished by death under the Law of Moses (Deut 17:12); this presumption was not against the priest or judge, but by the priest himself, and doubly reprehensible. Judgment was about to begin, and it would begin in the house of God (1Peter 4:17).

**2. Samuel speaks to Eli**

Imagine a boy in his teens receiving such a message from the Lord, a message of judgment upon his *de facto* father, and priest in the house of God! Samuel did not get up and run to Eli when he got this message. He was, understandably, afraid to tell Eli the vision (3:15). He lay down until morning, when he got up and went about his duties as normal. But Eli felt Samuel was hiding something from him; Eli had told Samuel that it was probably the Lord calling him in the night. If Samuel felt bad about hiding the words of the Lord from Eli, he was soon put at ease by a threatening oath from Eli (3:17).

‘Then Samuel told him everything, and hid nothing from him’ (3:18). Sometimes the messenger is blamed for the message he delivers, but with Samuel it was more that he did not want to hurt Eli. However, prophetic words are to be spoken; the truth must be spoken in love (Eph 4:15). The man who failed to teach and restrain his own sons, resigned himself to the will of God, distressing and tragic as this was.

People get upset with their doctor when he does not tell them they have cancer. ‘I want the truth; I want to know everything’ they say. How strange that they do not want to hear the truth about their spiritual condition, or the truth about what happens after they die, namely judgment before almighty God. Besides, your doctor may well misdiagnose your cancer, but the Lord’s diagnosis of your spiritual condition is never mistaken.

The truth is very clear- after death comes the judgment (Heb 9:27). But there is good news, a truth that sits beside the truth of judgment, the truth that is Jesus Christ. Jesus said, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me’ (John 14:6). There was no atonement for Eli and his sons, but there is for you, if and when you confess your sins and believe in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

**3. Samuel, a prophet of the Lord**

The words of judgment upon Eli and his sons give way to words of hope, words focussed on Samuel who, unlike Eli’s two sons, listened to, and believed, the words of God. ‘Samuel grew, and the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground’ (3:19). We read similar words about John the Baptist, the last OT prophet (Luke 1:80), and ultimately about Jesus, the prophets of prophets, who as a youth increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men (Luke 2:52). Ours sons may not be prophets like Samuel, but we can still pray that they will grow up into Christ, and that the Lord will be with them all their days. I hope you are demonstrating to them what such a blessed life is like!

‘The Lord let none of his words fall to the ground’ (3:19). Let us ponder these words as we draw this sermon to a close. The words we read in the newspaper end up in the bin because they have no lasting value. Sadly, many of the words we speak have no lasting value either, unless they are the words of God, words that we still read today in the Bible, words that are eternally relevant words of the eternal God.

Samuel the prophet spoke the words of God, words that we still read today because they are eternally relevant, even though they have already come true. Samuel’s words, as the words of God, never failed to come to pass, or never ‘fell to the ground’. The prophet Isaiah said of the words of God, ‘So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return void but it shall accomplish what I please’ (Isa 55:11). Why waste your time listening to words that fall to the ground at the end of the day? Much better to listen to words that are true, words that will never pass away, words that bring life if you listen and pay heed to them?

People in Israel listened to Samuel as they saw that none of his words fell to the ground. He was established as a prophet in Israel, from the city of Dan in the north to Beersheba in the south. Samuel continued to live in Shiloh where the Lord spoke to him, just as he spoke to Moses generations before. The word of the Lord was no longer rare in those days because the Lord had raised up a prophet who spoke his words to all Israel. Days of darkness had ended; the light of God’s word was again shining among his people. May the light of God’s word shine upon you and yours, and upon our nation today.