

*God's breaks in*

Just picture the scene: the temple in Jerusalem at night. The crowds have all departed and all is still and an eerie silence hangs over the temple precincts. Deep within the walls however lie two people, one an old man and the other a young boy who stirs in his sleep. The boy, Samuel is his name, is there because he was a gift to his parents when it appeared that his mother would remain childless, and out of gratitude she has given him back to God to serve God in the temple. And the old man is Eli, the priest, whose eyesight is failing... 'he could not see', we are told. And Samuel and Eli lie on their beds, and of course it is very dark, the only light coming from the lamp of God, probably a golden lampstand that was lit every evening and that cast flickering shadows on the walls. And we are told that this lamp had not yet gone out.

Well, that is the scene, but they say that every picture tells a story and that is certainly true of what we see here, for there is a telling correspondence between what is portrayed here in the temple and what was going on outside in the world beyond the temple. So, for example, is it not somehow fitting that we should be taken into the temple at night when all is quiet, for we are told that 'The Word of God was rare in those days' - in other words God was largely silent? So the silence of the temple denoted a crisis of the Word of God had come upon the land. And is it not fitting that we should be introduced to a priest whose eyesight was failing, for we are told that in those days 'visions were not widespread'? In other words a spiritual blindness had come upon the land. And is it not fitting that we are told that the lamp of God had not yet gone out for clearly it was close to extinction and what does the lamp of God symbolise but the presence of God? So the flickering lamp denoted a crisis of the divine presence in the land. And all this is in keeping with what we know of the situation in Israel at this time of Samuel and Eli. It was the period when the land was ruled by people called judges and we are told twice in a previous book that this was a time when 'everyone did what was right in their own eyes...' In other words it was a time of anarchy and lawlessness. And in many ways Eli represented an old, failing order that had come to the end of its life. In a previous chapter we have been introduced to Eli's sons who minister in the temple are described as 'scoundrels' and who are devious and self-serving, and the overall impression therefore is of a society that has reached the end, that has

reached crisis point, that is expiring with a failed leadership and a failed priesthood, and one from which God seems to have largely departed. And of course what is so depressing is that there doesn't seem to be any way through all this. There doesn't seem to be any hope of change or for a better tomorrow for where is 'something better' to come from? What is going to kick-start something new and put things back on track?

Well, listen carefully, for something is stirring. In the depths of the night in the darkness of the temple a word comes to that young boy lying on his bed - and something is happening. I wonder how you picture this. Maybe my imagination is going into over-drive but I picture God rather like a burglar, breaking into the temple and prowling around it. The temple is supposed to be God's dwelling place but God has long since departed, leaving a redundant priesthood endlessly going through empty motions. And now God breaks in, padding round the precincts in the dark, and I imagine the lamp of the God flaring up as God passes, aroused by the divine presence. And God comes not to Eli - not to Eli the priest, not to Eli the religious representative, not to Eli the religious establishment figure - but to the child. And God tip-toes into Samuel's room and he whispers, 'Psst! Samuel! Samuel!' And Samuel who is not used to hearing the voice of God assumes it is Eli calling him. And Eli who is not accustomed to the divine presence tells him to go back to his bed. 'Pssst! Samuel! Samuel!' - again the same thing happens. Until finally old blind Eli with his failing vision and his cloth ears cottons on to what is happening. And what is happening is that God is at work, breaking into an old and tired and deathly scenario, starting something new. And that is good but it is also difficult because for Eli because it means loss, it means the end of his dynasty, it means that there are things that have to go and he has to be told that by a child that his priesthood is over and he has to have the grace and humility to receive it. But unexpectedly, quietly, hidden, God breaks in. And it is interesting to consider this in the light of the passage we looked at last week, when we heard about Jesus' baptism. You recall how as Jesus came up out of the water we're told that the heavens 'were torn apart' and the Holy Spirit descended like a dove. Here God was breaking in, only in a dramatic and public way, with the beating of wings and the tearing of the heavens. But here in this Samuel story God comes stealthily and quietly. The sky remains closed and the temple door stays shut.

In some ways, of course, we are back to the Christmas story. There too was a hopeless, deathly, dead-end scenario with a nation under occupation and a religious establishment that had lost touch with God. And as with Samuel God comes quietly, secretly, to the last place you'd expect - to shepherds in the depth of the night who are summoned to a shed. And these nobodies hear and speak the Word of God, as God breaks in.

And of course this is what God does. In situations of fear and darkness and where God seems absent God breaks in – sometimes dramatically but often quietly, unobtrusively with whispers and nudges and signs. It's what happened in Nazareth. Our reading from John describes the first encounter of Jesus with two disciples, Philip and Nathaniel. Philip has met Jesus and he tells Nathaniel that he has found the Messiah and that he comes from Nazareth. And Nathaniel is scathing: 'can anything good come out of Nazareth?' he asks. And why should Nazareth be so despised? Well, the reason may be that Nazareth had a dark past. Around the time of Jesus' birth there were a number of rebellions and uprisings against the Roman occupiers, and one was in a town near Nazareth called Sepphoris. Such rebellions were put down ruthlessly and the Roman response was swift, capturing and burning Sepphoris and reducing its inhabitants to slavery. And what do you think happened to small villages near Sepphoris? What do you think happened to the tiny hamlet of Nazareth just four miles from Sepphoris? Well, we don't know for sure, but we do know the Roman practice elsewhere and that was that whenever there was an uprising the Romans retaliated by devastating the whole area – every town and village in the vicinity. So Nazareth, so close to Sepphoris was in all probability a sad and scarred place, a place of tears and of dark memories of rape and slaughter and plunder. Nothing good can ever come out of there. But something good did come out of Nazareth. Something good came out because God broke in there in the person of his son, Jesus.

Here, surely, is the Gospel. God breaks in. Where human resources run out and darkness descends God breaks in, often quietly and to unexpected places and through unexpected people, and something new and life-giving begins. And there are so many ways we could think of this. One of the disturbing aspects of the events of the past week or so in Paris is that religion has once again come under scrutiny, and it's not surprising that religion was one of the regular targets of the Charlie Hebdo magazine that was so horrifically attacked. The magazine is fiercely anti-religious and for many

people that is about all that religion is good for – ridicule and mockery. And certainly here in Europe it is true to say of the Christian faith that the lamp of God is burning low, even if it has not yet gone out – and it seems sometimes that the Word of God is rare and visions infrequent in an increasingly secular climate. And as in Samuel’s day it’s easy to feel that God has departed the religious establishment as it quarrels endlessly over sexuality and as it struggles to deal with decline and is afflicted by scandals. And today, this Sunday, falls in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and we cannot help but acknowledge the tragic conflict and friction between the different parts of Christ’s body the church, and how that must make God want to depart it altogether. But can God break in and do something new? And what will have to go and what will we have to let go of, for as with Eli God’s new initiative often means loss and endings and things that have to die before new life can emerge.

The same thing is true at a personal level – God breaks in. I guess that many of us here would have a story to tell of how God has broken into our lives, and in some cases that may have been dramatically and noisily but for many others it has been quietly and softly, like God speaking to Samuel. And perhaps, like Samuel, at first you didn’t recognise the voice as God’s. You didn’t realise that God was breaking into your life but somehow you found the grace to say, ‘speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’ I was intrigued last week, in all the fallout over the murders in Paris and when everybody was tweeting and expressing an opinion to read something by the author J. K. Rowling. She was obviously wanting to say something reconciliatory about different faiths and she said, ‘I happened to be born Christian’ – the implication being that she might as well have been born Muslim or Hindu or whatever. Well, sorry, JK, but we need to put you right. No-one is born Christian. If anyone is a Christian it is only because God has broken into their life - quietly or noisily, with the tearing of the heavens or with God padding in and whispering ‘Psst! Over here!’ And it may have been in a time of darkness when the lamp of your life was burning low. And as with Samuel and Eli it may have heralded change, with painful loss and ending.

God breaks in. Here is our hope in a world where God can at times seem to be absent and silent. God breaks in. Here is our hope when for whatever reason our flame burns low – be it the flame of our faith or the flame of our hope or the flame of our love or the flame of our life. God breaks in with whispers in the night and in the most unusual ways and through the most

unusual people. God give us grace to respond by saying, 'speak Lord, your servant is listening. Amen.