

Sermon for Sunday 26 December 2021 – online and 9.30am at Chilton

Listening

Readings: 1 Samuel 2: 18-20 and 26 Luke 2: 41-52

Good morning

Having just celebrated Jesus' birth yesterday, the appointed readings in the lectionary for today jump to an account of Jesus visiting the Temple in Jerusalem at the age of 12 which we heard in our second reading. Our first reading from 1 Samuel also gave us a glimpse of life at the House of the Lord, this time in Shiloh, featuring the even younger boy, Samuel.

Samuel had been born to Hannah and Elkanah after many years of yearning for a baby. Hannah's prayer had been answered and she gave birth to Samuel. She, in accordance with her promise to God, presented him to God at the House of the Lord at Shiloh when he was weaned. Her song to the Lord which appears earlier in chapter 2 is one of gratitude and praise to the Lord and bears a lot of similarities to Mary's song in Luke chapter 1 where she expresses her praise and trust in almighty God.

What a wrench it must have been for Hannah and her husband to let go of this precious longed-for little boy. God responded to Hannah's faithfulness and blessed her with more children and a life in which she could continue to honour him by visiting Samuel each year. On each visit she took him home-made clothes, including special robes and an ephod to wear as he ministered to the Lord. Samuel was cared for by the elderly priest Eli who nurtured and mentored him in his priestly duties. Samuel must have been a delight to care for and teach as he was attentive to God and to Eli and he listened carefully to instruction – in sharp contrast to Eli's own wicked sons who abused their positions as priests.

As a very young boy Samuel heard God calling him but he didn't understand at first what was happening and thought it was Eli calling him. When Eli realised that Samuel was hearing God's voice, he told him to respond by saying 'Speak Lord for your servant is listening'. Samuel grew in love for, and faith in, the

Lord and became a wise and discerning leader. So much of this was due to the fact that he listened to God's voice and to human instruction and was obedient.

Similarly in the account of Jesus' visit to the Temple with his family in Luke chapter 2, we see a boy who listens and is attentive to God and to human teaching.

Jesus and his family were visiting the Temple to celebrate the Festival of Passover as they did every year along with other observant Jews. Every adult male living within 15 miles of Jerusalem was expected to make these visits to the Temple to celebrate Passover and other major festivals. Jews living further afield made strenuous efforts to come to the Temple whenever they could. Jesus was 12 years of age and was nearing the time when he would be considered a man at the age of 13. He and his family travelled with other relatives and friends in a walking caravan of people which allowed for companionship and safety.

Jerusalem was thronging with people at this time and it's not surprising that Mary and Joseph didn't see Jesus for some time. They set off back home to Nazareth and wouldn't have been concerned that he wasn't with them as he would have been safe with other relatives and friends. But after a day they realised that they had really lost him and went back to the city. After 3 days they found him in the temple taking part in the discussions with the leading council, the Sanhedrin. It was the practise of the Sanhedrin to meet outside in the temple courts at Passover to discuss religious and theological matters and other Jewish worshippers could listen and take part in the debate. Jesus listened carefully and took part in the discussion to such an extent that he impressed the leaders and teachers of the law, not because he was precocious but because he listened carefully and was eager to learn.

His parents were also astonished. But Mary admonished him for apparently treating them with a lack of care and told him off for creating anxiety for her and his father. Jesus' reply seems a little uncaring to our ears.

"Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he was saying to them.

I'm sure Jesus wasn't intending to be harsh but he was sharing with his earthly parents the growing realisation that he was the Son of God. Jesus subtly took

the word father and turned it to Father with a capital F which refers to God. Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?

Jesus was not precocious and puffed up but returned home with his family and, Luke tells us, he was obedient to them. He grew in wisdom and stature and in favour with God and people. Mary clearly came to understand even more clearly who Jesus was and treasured these things in her heart.

Both these young boys, Samuel and Jesus, shared a desire to listen to God and to learn from him and from their human teachers.

Are we good listeners? Listening is a wonderful skill which takes practice and time to acquire. I thank God for those who are good listeners. Maybe, as we prepare for a new year, we could pray for a resolve to listen more attentively to God and to those who teach us?

How can we listen to God more attentively? I'd suggest that we begin by listening before we speak and set out our long list of prayer requests. In the quiet of listening we give God the opportunity to guide our thoughts. We can then start to praise God and thank him for his goodness to us, and then move into prayers for the needs of others and ourselves.

We can also listen attentively in the context of a home group where we can study the Bible, absorb teaching and spend time praying together.

As well as listening to God it is also important that we listen to other people carefully.

In chapter 1 of his epistle, James advises 'My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry'. This is wise advice. It is so important to listen rather than to interrupt other people and have our say, express our opinion, as we might misunderstand if we don't listen carefully. Note also that James says 'slow to become angry'. There is so much anger in the world and we can play our part in turning down the heat by listening carefully in order to understand more fully what others are really saying and take time to formulate our response instead of adding fuel to the fire of confrontation.

Let us learn from the examples of these two young boys, Samuel and Jesus, and learn to listen carefully to God and to instruction from those who teach us and become the people that God intends us to be. Amen.