

Epiphany Two Year B 2021

I call this Sunday Epiphany 2, but according to the 'Calendar and Lectionary' of the Scottish Episcopal Church, we are at Proper 2, that is, the second Sunday in 'Ordinary Time' - we move from liturgical white to green, from celebration to something else - which will end on Ash Wednesday and purple. I beg to differ - my crib is still in the sitting room and will remain there until Candlemas (Feb. 2), I will play carols until Candlemas - celebrating Christmas and Epiphany for forty days - why are we always in such a hurry to move on? Why can't we appreciate the moment, live in the present, even if the commercial world wants us to rush to the future and buy hot cross buns and Easter eggs in January?

And when we think about today's readings, there is nothing 'ordinary' about them - two stories of calling and vocation, one about a young boy destined to be a great prophet ('the Lord let none of his words fall to the ground'), and the other about a sceptic ('Can anything good come out of Nazareth?'), who becomes a dogged disciple - and perhaps these stories are also

about two go-betweens, an old, blind, failed priest and a young enthusiast.

Let's start with the OT reading - this is no ordinary story, this is extraordinary. A young boy is told to answer a call and to listen to what is said - and the news is not good - well, not good for Eli and his sons - Samuel (whose name means 'God listens') speaks truth to power - Eli, (whose name means 'my God') - Eli's response? 'It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him'. The time is the 11th century BC - the place is the shrine in the small town of Shiloh, where the ark of God is kept. One day, Eli, the high priest, is sitting on the door step of the shrine and sees a woman praying. She is praying out of the bitterness of her life, weeping. The high priest sees her lips move but hears no words. He thinks the woman is drunk, and promptly tells her to leave the wine alone. But the dazed looking woman is not drunk, and explains to Eli that she is barren whilst her husband's other wife has many children. Eli listens sympathetically to the woman's story of grief and resentment; she tells him too that if she were to have a male child, she will give him back to God for the whole of his life - it seems an irrational promise to make, but make it

she did. Eli promises to pray for her, confident that God will answer their prayers. And 'God listens'.

And in due time, the son is born, named Samuel, and Hannah, takes him to Shiloh and gives him to God. He will be reared by the priests - but it seems they teach him only about the jobs that need doing in the shrine - they don't teach him about God. The child helps with the religious activities and also looks after Eli, who is now very old. He can no longer see, and he cannot keep under control his sons, who would inherit his position as priest but seem to have no respect for the God of their father. And then God calls Samuel, at a time when the lamp of God has *not yet gone out*. What does that mean? It could mean many things. That the lamp was lit in the evening and burned until the morning- dusk until dawn - to signify the presence of God in the shrine, by the Ark, or that the people were to bring oil so that the lamp never went out - the Biblical texts are inconclusive. But in any event, the lamp was clearly a sign of God's abiding presence in the temple - and so with God's people - so much so that the lamp was never simply to flicker out. And yet in this Old Testament reading, it seems as if the light was going to flicker out. Of course this could just mean that it was getting towards

dawn, and the oil was done - and either Samuel or someone else needed to add more oil - or that the new day was beginning and they didn't need the lamp any more - or the significance could be greater. So much hangs on those two words - *not yet*. The lamp had *not yet gone out*.

God's word was rare. Visions had become uncommon. Even Eli, who slept within site of the Ark of the Covenant, had to respond three times to Samuel, before he realised that this was God calling. The presence of God had become tenuous, the divine light a bare flicker - but the lamp of God had *not yet gone out*. With Samuel it was about to flare up with renewed brightness.

God's call to Samuel, although it was hard news for Eli, was a word of disruption, but it was also a word of hope. The lamp of truth would burn brightly once more.

We have seen some difficult times in the past few months, but we must remember that the lamp of God has *not yet gone out*.

Days are dark, as they were in the days of Samuel, but the lamp of God, had not, has *not yet gone out*. The promise of Epiphany's light is that this lamp will never go out. The light of the world that shines in Epiphany still shines - occasionally flickers - but never goes out.

Like Samuel we need to hear the call of the Lord and say 'Speak, Lord, your servant is listening'. When it comes to prayer, we are far too fond of giving God our shopping list - this is what I want you to do - and very seldom sit in quietness and wait for God to tell us what He wants us to do.

Let us go back to Eli - his job in the sacred scheme of things is to introduce others to the Lord and to their new vocations. Firstly Hannah and then Samuel. Samuel grows up to be the last of the great judges and the first king-maker. Eli is there when new beginnings take place. The same can be said about John the Baptist and Andrew. John introduces two of his own disciples to Jesus - 'Behold, the Lamb of God' - the disciples follow Jesus and stay with him - John points away from himself and towards Jesus. That is his role. Andrew leaves John and follows Jesus, and then brings with him his brother Simon, who is renamed Cephas - Peter - the rock - not that he was always solid and secure - but in the end he was there and willing to do what Jesus asked him to do - 'feed my sheep'.

But Andrew is often the shepherd - he introduces a child with loaves and fishes to Jesus, he arranges a meeting between Jesus

and 'some Greeks' who had come for the festival - Andrew's role is to bring others into the presence of the Lord.

Do you remember who introduced you to Jesus? You may, like me, have been a cradle Christian, although I confess that I only went to chapel because it was easier than having an argument with my mother about it - she insisted because her mother insisted - and it was only after I wasn't compelled to attend - and I found an Anglican church - that it became a pleasure, and had meaning. But none of us come to Jesus alone - someone has to invite us - take us by the hand - to say 'come and see'. And having been taken, we also need to take, to introduce. We don't have to be great missionaries - if we believe that Jesus is worth knowing, we can bring people on board by our quiet witness. In that way the faith grows. And there will never be an end to it. The Lamp of God has *not yet* gone out - and it never will.