

Calling Samuel

People in different places greet one another in different ways. I suppose in Britain, the standard greeting is to say, “hello, how are you?”, to which the acceptable response is, “I’m fine thank you” regardless of whether in fact, you are fine thank you. In the Black country where I grew up, you don’t say hello, you say, “Alright” to which the acceptable response serves as both the answer and the question, “Alright!?” But in Pembrokeshire, which is as far west as you can go into Wales without falling off, the standard greeting is “How are you now?”, to which the acceptable response is, “Here I am”. “How are the kids?” “There they are!” It’s a very biblical way of greeting one another, that – as far as I can make out, begins with Abraham.

Whenever God addressed Abraham, the father of the faith would always respond with a Pembrokeshire response “Here I am”. It speaks of a presence, a readiness to hear what’s coming next. Sure, when it becomes a standardised form of greeting, it loses something of its dynamism. But these are the same words that are used by Samuel when he is greeted by the Lord.

And it is worth trying to imagine Samuel’s position. I can remember the first time I heard this story as a boy in St Anne’s Parish church, where everyone greeted one another by saying ‘alright’. And wondering what on earth was so surprising to these Biblical figures about hearing God speak. God was in the habit of talking to people, and these were well known Biblical characters. Of course they were going to hear God speak – what was all the fuss about?

But the era was one where God did not seem to be in a very vocal mood. Or perhaps, there was a lack of readiness to hear God’s voice. But you have a boy sleeping in this temple, not in Jerusalem, but in a place called Shiloh. And he hears the voice of Adonai, addressing him. Can you imagine what this would be like? An audible voice, addressing you by name. Naturally you would go running for the nearest adult! As someone who is woken by young boys no less than three occasions on any given night, I would love to know what this old man Eli thought, being woken up by a boy saying, “you called me, you called me.”

It is a bizarre story, because it suggests that God would not talk properly to this little boy until the little boy offered the acceptable response. “Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.” And when the Lord does speak to this young boy, what does he say? He says – right – I’m about to tell you something awful. Your family are doomed!” The old man Eli gets the news out of him, and demonstrates his own readiness to submit to the will of God, the punishment to be inflicted upon his sons.

All we are really told however, is that this is how Samuel became established as a prophet. He is a young prophet, a symbol of hope in a difficult time for Israel. Remembering that they were in Shiloh, 28 miles north of Jerusalem. Jerusalem was not in the hands of Israel, and would not be for a few decades yet. The nation of Israel was simply a bunch of tribes scattered largely throughout the hill country – and Shiloh was the closest thing they had to a capital city. And here, when the leadership had become corrupt and nobody seemed to be seeking the voice of God, at this time, in this place, the young prophet is anointed for ministry.

It is difficult not to draw parallels with events that will unfold in North America this week. A new president, the 44th president of the United States and the first black president, will be inaugurated on Tuesday. It is an exciting time for many people, because like Samuel, he adopts his role as a national leader at a difficult and uncertain time. He will inevitably upset many people very soon, because of decisions that his administration will have to take. He will upset many people who have invested great hope in this figure, thinking that he will offer a welcome liberal departure from the Bush Administration. He will upset those who over-estimate the actual power that a president has over American policy. Barack Obama has a difficult time ahead of him.

And it is hardly coincidental that the ceasefire in Israel should fall just as the inauguration activities begin. The Israeli government are presuming, and with good reason, that the 44th President of the United States will be supportive of their cause. When the fighting starts again, which it inevitably will, Israel will expect the backing of the Obama administration.

The 44th president comes to office at a difficult time, and whatever he does is destined to make enemies.

This was precisely the case for the young Samuel. It was Samuel who would serve as a leader for the nation, Samuel who would try to resist the nation's demand for a king, Samuel who eventually caved in and anointed Saul. And then it was Samuel who eventually anointed King David, the archetypal national leader for Israel.

All that marked this character could be seen in his readiness to hear the voice of God in this place called "Shiloh". His readiness to hear God did not begin with Eli's instruction with how to respond. "Speak, Lord, for thy servant is listening" was not the green light for God to utter his word to his servant. It was already implicit in that Pembroke response, "Here I am."

It is not an easy response to bring to God. If you think back to Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, ashamed after they had eaten fruit from the forbidden tree. God asks them the saddest, most tragic question in the Bible. "Where are you Adam?" These human beings, described as his children, the pinnacle of his creation, living in harmony with the creation and the creator. God, in the end, has to ask this question – where are you Adam. And it takes the rest of the Bible to answer that question. And the answer begins with Abraham – - where are you Adam, where are you humankind – Here I am. It is the same response brought to God by this young prophet.

At a difficult time in the life of the nation, at a time where people had given up listening for God, this young prophet has no idea that he stands on the brink of a new era as he offers his response to the voice of God, "Here I am".

Alice is only just beginning to realise that just because her eyes are closed, it doesn't mean you can't see her. Just because everything has gone dark for her, it doesn't mean that it has gone dark for everyone else. And when I can hear her in the Kitchen, rustling for something she shouldn't be eating before tea, I call her. "Alice, come out of the cupboards." And how does she respond? "It isn't me." "Then who is it?" "It's erm ... Stefan." "Stefan is sitting here next to me..." and the conversation turns ridiculous. She is up to something that she shouldn't be doing, and the last thing she wants to say is, "Here I am!" Is it any easier for a president of the United States, a president whose Christian faith is widely and rightly

celebrated, is it any easier for the leader of a nation rummaging through all sorts of cupboards, to say “Here I am!” The 44th president begins his term of office at an incredibly difficult time.

In the Gospel reading we hear of another prophet. Jesus, who was clearly somehow aware of what this Blameless Israelite was up to when he was sat under a fig tree. But that openness and ready response is there in Nathanael. No explanation is given for this response. And logically, you cannot see how he arrives at his conclusion. But confronted with the greeting of Jesus he looks at someone who has just proven his credentials as a prophet, and refers to him as a king. “You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” Remembering again, that for a first century Palestinian Jew, the Son of God does not mean the second person of the Trinity. The son of God means the King. You are the son of God, you are the King of Israel!

How he reached that conclusion we don’t know. We are not told. But his readiness to encounter God so as to have his prejudice overcome is clear from the text. When Philip had first told him about the Messiah, his response is, “can anything good come from Nazareth?” It was not a town with a great reputation for producing prophets or kings. But on his encounter with Jesus, his prejudice is immediately overcome. Unlike Alice, he comes straight out of the cupboards, he abandons his prejudice in full acknowledgement of who it is that is stood before him. Nathanael makes himself present to Jesus. “Here I am”.

Of course, we all have our prejudices. Of course we have lifestyles that readily exclude God and his word. Of course all nations and all individuals rummage around in cupboards where perhaps they shouldn’t be. But what really counts is not what we are doing, what we already believe, what our behaviours and our prejudices are. All that counts is how we respond to this Jesus.

Whether, when we encounter the voice of God, we ignore it because we are committed to our prejudices and our behavioural patterns. Or whether we are able to stand before the God who confronts us and declare “here I am.”

Rather than trying to free ourselves from prejudices, or make ourselves right before God, or get ourselves out of the messes that we get ourselves into. Rather than trying to be the right kind of person so that God will hear us or bless us or love us. What counts is how we respond to the voice of God, here and now, today. Are we able – on hearing his voice – to say “Here I am.”

