**‘Greater things than these’**

Sermon preached by Bishop Jo in the Diocese of Guildford for Sunday 17th January 2021

**1 Sam 3:1-20**

*Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.*

*At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; 3the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. 4Then the Lord called, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ and he said, ‘Here I am!’ 5and ran to Eli, and said, ‘Here I am, for you called me.’ But he said, ‘I did not call; lie down again.’ So he went and lay down. 6The Lord called again, ‘Samuel!’ Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, ‘Here I am, for you called me.’ But he said, ‘I did not call, my son; lie down again.’ 7Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. 8The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, ‘Here I am, for you called me.’ Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. 9Therefore Eli said to Samuel, ‘Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” ’ So Samuel went and lay down in his place.*

*Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ And Samuel said, ‘Speak, for your servant is listening.’*

**John1:43-51**

*The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow me.’ 44Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. 45Philip found Nathanael and said to him, ‘We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.’ 46Nathanael said to him, ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ Philip said to him, ‘Come and see.’ 47When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, ‘Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!’ 48Nathanael asked him, ‘Where did you come to know me?’ Jesus answered, ‘I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.’ 49Nathanael replied, ‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!’ 50Jesus answered, ‘Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.’ 51And he said to him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.’*

Responding to the gospel reading, we’ve just heard Jesus calling to Nathanael from under the fig tree and promising him greater things than he has yet seen. He’s being introduced to another world. I wonder where you’ve glimpsed or heard ‘greater things than these’ – and if so when & where you’re aware of them and how you stay in touch with that other world? And I wonder which world is most real for you?

I want to tell you a story about our cat, Rolo, who 4½ years ago moved with the rest of the family from a fourth floor flat in central London to a house with a garden in leafy Surrey. Don’t believe any story she might spin of the sacrifice of ministry: this was a move from being a wholly confined indoor creature to Suddenly Discovering a Whole Nother World – the world of green grass and trees that move in the wind; birds that fly in and out of their branches, even the occasional deer or fox that crosses our lawn. The great outdoors. She spent 3 weeks eyeing these greater things every hour of day and night from one windowsill or another of our lovely new home: utterly fascinated – spell-bound. We imagined her wondering if that world out there was really real: if the promise of Jesus that you will see greater things than these might be true! And then the big moment came when she got to step outside. What a revelation. I remember her treading on the grass – gently, slowly, luxuriantly, ears twitching, over-stimulated, fully alive - and then looking up at us in glee. It *is* real! ‘How come you kept all this a secret?’, was the look in her eyes. We’ve barely seen her since except for food.

I imagine some similar kind of wondering from Nathanael, until Jesus saw him under the fig tree and called him – and promises ‘very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man’. Nathanael came out from the shadow of that tree at the promise of greater things, a wider universe; he discovered a world more real. And, as if without looking back, from that point on his life was shaped in witness to it. If he ever went back to the fig tree it was only for food.

And then from our earlier reading from 1 Sam 3 we have the wonderful story of the boy Samuel in the temple. I love that he heard a voice and kept thinking it was Eli calling him. He assumed the voice came from this world, from the master he already knew – why ever wouldn’t he. But the one calling persists, and Samuel keeps responding, and Eli has the presence of mind or at least the experience of years to realise that this might be God (we’re given to believe his senses were a tad past their best, in their sunset years) and to attune the young Samuel to that possibility. I love the way the narrator underlines how ‘Samuel did not yet know the Lord and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him’ (v.7). And then after the third time of asking Samuel discovers the Lord and invites the Lord to be revealed: ‘Speak Lord for your servant is listening’. And God does speak, even though our reading cuts out at that point, v.10 (which seems rather tragic!) - given that it goes on to describe how God is going to do something in Israel that ‘will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle’.

Samuel’s ears are already tingling, twitching, fully alive. So here we have another wonderful account of discovering a whole nother world. Notice it’s the kind of world that persists whether we take notice of it or not, whether we respond or not, whether we believe it or not. It doesn’t depend on us. But if we do heed it, we discover a world where God is speaking and acting – and in such a way that both ears tingle.

I wonder if you are someone who is searching for that world, who longs to discover it. Or perhaps you’ve come across it yet missed the chance to respond. If any of those are you, you don’t need to worry that you missed your moment. Just as Rolo is never moving back to London – the cat is out of the bag, so to speak – so you don’t need to worry that the world that is really real, the ultimate essence, is passing. It is not; it’s for good; it’s the one that really does last, for ever.

And at the risk of sounding a bit like Eli, I might urge you to open yourself up. To say to God, ‘speak Lord, your servant is listening’. It doesn’t matter if you’ve never spoken to God before or you didn’t hear if God did speak – both of those are true of Samuel. It doesn’t even matter if you’re sceptical. If it’s really real, and you are truly searching, then I assure you there’ll be a ‘bingo’ moment with God. Dare to voice your longing… to say a prayer… or to keep on reading in John’s gospel past chapter 1. Phone someone to help you – a neighbour who’s a Christian, a distant cousin, even your local vicar – they’d gladly respond, no question too stupid. I remember saying to someone once that I wasn’t sure that prayer really worked, who replied: have you *really* tried it? Have you shut yourself in a room and cried ‘God if you’re really there, I really long to know’ like your life depended on it? I dare you, he said, to pour out your heart and pin back your ears. And when I overcame all of my own blockages, sure enough I did become aware of the presence of God, a transforming presence. But I needed to sit still long enough, to step out of my own little frenzy.

And now, if you’re someone who a bit like Samuel has heard God’s voice, or like Nathanael has glimpsed the greater things of God – someone who IS aware of the *living mystery* at the heart of our *existence*, I want to ask: do you recognise that world as the most real one?

Christianity depends on a fundamental conviction that is impossible to prove and can’t fully be captured in the creeds. Simply put: the Judeo-Christian faith declares there is another reality besides the one we’re in, which is in fact more *real* than the one we’re in. We sometimes call that reality heaven, and the one we’re in earth. In more philosophical language we might call the ultimate reality *essence*, and the more immediate reality *existence*. Whatever you call it - the beyond, the spiritual - and whether you think it’s up there, waiting to arrive here, or in some other realm entirely - it’s a reality suffused with God in a way that this reality is not.

Which world is most real to you, and how do you bear witness to it?

I end with a definition of ‘witness’ borrowed from Emmanuel Suhard, who was Archbishop of Paris in the 1940s*.*

To be a witness doesn’t consist in engaging in propaganda, nor in stirring people up, but in being a living mystery. It means living in such a way that one’s life would not make sense if God did not exist.’

*Witness* is about living in such a way that my life does not make sense without the ultimate reality, the *essence*, the greater things. So I invite you to ask yourself: how do I bear witness? Or put another way, what in my life would not make sense without that other world?

Samuel became a prophet. That is the Bible’s archetype of someone who lives in such a way that their life does not make sense if God did not exist. They are those who speak for God – and who voice God’s truth no matter what it costs - and at the same time, point to Jesus.

John the Baptist is the New Testament’s classic portrayal of the prophet. His life does not make sense if Jesus is not the Messiah. Eating locusts and wild honey make no sense unless John is fulfilling the role of the promised Elijah who was expected to return before the Messiah appeared. Declaring this uncomfortable truth to Herod makes no sense if Jesus is not God, the one who makes Herod’s power seem pitiful.

What about you – how are you a witness? Let me tell you about a couple of people who come to mind because their lives make no sense if God does not exist. First I think of a friend, a woman perhaps 10 years younger than me, who has made life vows in a religious community, committed to centering her life around comtemplative prayer and listening to the needs of others. Her life makes absolutely no sense if God does not exist. I think of a young man who’s meant to be studying immunology at uni but on New Year’s day volunteered to live in a Care Home decimated by Covid, where vulnerable people need 24-7 care. Only right now he’s also down with Covid and is isolating in a caravan. It was his 20th birthday earlier this week so his Dad phoned and said ‘Sorry, it’s going to be just you and the Lord today’. ‘That’s all I need’ he replied.

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When we live like that we point to Jesus; we reveal that other world, the one that is really real. That means that others are given a chance to glimpse ‘greater things than these’. I think a lot of people are desperate for those things right now. You know, if they could only glimpse what Samuel heard God saying, what Nathanael saw Jesus reveal, it would make both their ears tingle til their hearts were leaping for joy.

*Lord God, grant that we may live in such a way that our lives would not make sense without you. Grant this through how we work and how we rest; through what we do and what we say; through who we notice and how we relate. Like the prophets may we voice the truth and point to Christ. All for your glory, for what really matters. Amen.*