

Chrim Eucharist – The Dean reflects on the calling of all the baptised.

I love the story of Samuel.  
Every time I hear it,  
I am taken back to my ladybird book,  
with its pictures of the curly headed child  
in a white nightie,  
earnestly seeking the advice  
of his kindly elderly guardian.

But in truth,  
that domesticated and cosy vision  
of the call of God is nothing like the reality,  
in my experience  
and perhaps in yours.

It took the writings of Barbara Brown Taylor  
to place this story in a different perspective for me, and I'm grateful for her  
reframing of the call of Samuel.

She paints a horrific picture of the life of this young child, acting as a servant  
in the temple.

She writes...

"We can only guess what it was like for Samuel as the faithful brought their  
burnt-offerings,  
their sin-offerings, and their guilt-offerings to the temple....  
There was a great deal of blood,  
blood splashed on the altar  
and blood sprinkled on the veil that separated the Holy of Holies from the  
rest of the sanctuary.  
The burning incense did battle with the smell  
but could not beat it;  
the place stank, no getting around it.  
Maybe Samuel tended the cauldron where the sacrificial meat was boiled,  
or helped Eli locate the portion he was allowed to eat as the temple priest.  
Maybe Samuel was allowed to feed on some of the scraps himself;  
there was little else for a growing boy to eat.

At night he lay down by the ark of God,  
the legendary throne of the invisible king Yahweh that Israel carried into  
battle at the head of her armies.

It was reputed to contain all the sacred relics of the nation's past: a  
container of manna, Aaron's budded rod, the tablets of the covenant.

Sleeping next to it had to be like sleeping in a graveyard, or under a volcano."

Imagine waking up in the dark there, and hearing that voice calling you.

How much safer it would feel to believe that it was the kindly old priest Eli  
calling, than to think that it might be the living God!

Samuel eventually responds to God, who is calling him,  
and there the story pauses.

It is many years before we hear how God will use Samuel to call his people to  
repentance again.

I wonder how many times in those intervening years Samuel recalled the  
story of his calling and wondered where it might lead?

Clergy and perhaps Lay Ministers get very used to telling their vocation  
stories. They get honed in the discernment process and as we continue in  
ministry, it is not uncommon to be asked

"how did you get into this?"

Or,

"what made you think that being a vicar was for you?".

But vocation is not particular to the clergy.

Every one of us has been called and set apart for ministry  
through our baptism.

Every one of us has been called, fed in the sacrament, strengthened through  
worship, to make God manifest in the world.

This service is set aside as an opportunity to reconnect to that call  
and to recommit ourselves to it.

We are invited to do this together, as the church of God,  
one body, united by one baptism.

And this call to live out our baptism is a high calling indeed.

I think that we do God and the church  
a disservice when we deny the strangeness of this calling.  
In a post-modern, post-Christian world,  
we are people with a counter-cultural calling  
and a counter-cultural sense of purpose.  
It is such a precious thing that we ought, with Samuel,  
to have a sense of the mystery of that call.

As the letter to the Hebrews reminds us,  
it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.  
But we don't do this alone, we are all in this together.  
In the same passage in Hebrews we are exhorted to support  
and encourage one another in our vocation,  
to persevere, to be ready and expecting to come into God's presence.  
We are one body, and we cannot and should not place all our expectations  
on a single part of that body, whether that is an unrealistic expectation of our  
own role, or an unrealistic expectation of the roles of others – a particular  
temptation in the church.

When we look around, whether here this morning, or in the place you  
worship on Sunday, or in any gathering of the church,  
We can see the kaleidoscope of gifts gathered together reflecting God's love  
in the world.  
What a joy and privilege it is to be a fragment of that rich pattern.

Often on this occasion we would be hearing from our bishop, and I'm  
touched to have been asked, instead, to preach this morning. But that gives  
me the opportunity to say something about our bishops, that they cannot  
easily say for themselves.

If we believe that the task of a bishop,  
whether our new Archbishop,  
or a future Bishop of Bristol,  
is to do the work of the whole church,  
whether that be saving us from financial challenges,  
or reviving our congregations,  
or reviving our place in the nation,  
then we will be sadly disappointed.

To be a bishop is to occupy a place in the body of Christ,  
following Jesus in love and service,  
Alongside the rest of the church.

It is not to be a pretend monarch,  
Or “the boss”,  
But to be a representative of the wider whole.

I love the pattern and order of Cathedral life,  
but I’m not a great lover of hierarchy,  
and becoming a Dean meant that I had to discern the difference.

Today, some of us are robed and some are not, some have places in processions and some do not. These are not signs of a hierarchy for us to resent and push back against, but signs of an ordered body, working and worshipping together.

The only thing that sets any of us apart is baptism, and we all share that.

It is tempting to fall into language which separates us instead of uniting us... Language which turns the clergy into the professional dispensers of religion, and lay people into consumers, it is not the language of the church. We are not ordering up a new bishop to deliver a better diocese or a new church. We are discerning the person called to be among us as a shepherd and pastor.

That person will know, only too well,  
how fearful it is to fall into the hands of the living God.

Might we take this opportunity, as we pray for them,  
to ask how we can build up the church together?

Might we take this opportunity, as we pray for one another,  
to give thanks for the wonderful variety  
of gifts, skills and charisms  
that God has called into the church  
that we see gathered here today?

Might we take this opportunity,  
as we pray for ourselves,  
to reconnect with the awesome responsibility  
placed on each one of us by our baptism  
and our calling to serve Christ.

May God bless us, Amen