

VISIONS

'The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread' 1 Sam 3.1

Bishop Hugh Montefiore

Hugh Montefiore, former bishop of Birmingham, was born into a prominent Jewish family. In a book he describes an experience he had at school:

'It was at Rugby that I became a Christian. I had a visionary experience. I don't think religious experience is very communicable, nor do I relish talking about it ... I suppose it's too holy for me. But I will. I saw a vision of someone in white whom I knew instinctively – and God knows why – to be Jesus. And I heard the words, although they weren't spoken words ... to follow him. Extraordinary.'

Most of us cannot claim to have had such a clear and direct vision, like the boy Samuel from our first reading, or Bishop Hugh – although a surprising number of people have experienced something a little like it. For most of us, vision is about a slow dawning, an insight, a sense of presence and guidance that God is leading us from and to something.

'Visions were not widespread'

It says that visions were not common in Samuel's day.
I wonder why?

We don't really know when he lived.

Certain clues in the text might suggest he lived at least 1000BC, possibly several centuries earlier.

What we do know, is that it was a time of transition for Israel. They were under threat from the Philistines.

Had God abandoned them?

Israel needed a new leader, and a new vision of who they were that would inspire and encourage them.

Later, Samuel would become a judge, soldier and priest, but above all one of the greatest prophets of Israel, making and breaking kings, and the pre-eminent leader of his people.

It feels like we are living in a similar time.

A time of transition, of threat and uncertainty in both religious and secular terms.

For the Church and the Nation.

Do we know who and what we are?

What is our vision in this context?

What does the story tell us about calling and vision?

This story of Samuel tells us some important things about calling and vision.

First, that the **initiative** is God's. Samuel only responds. It is easy to ask ourselves what our vision is, but this is the wrong question. It is God's vision that we want to discover, not our own.

Samuel is called by **name**. At Confirmation, the Bishop says to each candidate, *'God has called you by name and made you his own'*. God calls individuals and communities into his service personally.

But the call is from **within**. Eli cannot hear it. It is heard in the depths of our being, intimate, personal, a call all of our own, God's will for our lives spoken to the heart.

Then there is the need to **respond**. Samuel's response, *'Here I am'* is willing, enthusiastic and immediate – it says that he *'ran'* to Eli. Later, Samuel's response is to say, *'Speak Lord, for your servant is listening'*. He attends to God in the silence.

It is possible to get it **wrong**. Samuel first thinks that it is Eli calling him. Three times he goes to Eli – but God continues to call us until we realise what is happening. God does not give up in getting through to us, persistent but gentle.

Sometimes, it is **other people** who make us realise our calling. It is Eli who grasps that God is calling Samuel, and gives him advice that helps him to hear what God is saying.

Last, God gives to Samuel a difficult **message** of judgement and repentance. A message it says that *'will make the ears of all who hear it tingle'*. It is a hard message, but it changes the course of his life and the lives of others. God has priorities for our lives that often make us change direction. This is rarely easy.

Why does vision matter?

Hearing a call and having a vision are important to individuals, churches, communities and nations, but as Proverbs (29.18) remind us - *'Where there is no vision the people perish'*.

Vision is both magnet and compass.

It draws people together and also points the way.

To have a vision is to be connected to God's will both for our lives and for the whole community. Vision is about discerning God's leading, and then living life in the light of that insight.

Our vision at St Michael's

Visions might have been rare in Samuel's day, but today the Bishop asks that every parish should be able to articulate its own unique and special vision!

Printed on the pew sheet today, our vision at St Michael's adopted last year as part our Mission Action Plan:

'St Michael's is seeking to be the spiritual heart of the neighbourhood; creating a community of faith, of hope, and of belief in the power of God's love. Come and join us.'

Let's unpack that a bit.

We are **seeking**, always seeking, because we have not arrived and vision is about aspiration. Discipleship is something active, a case of following where the Master leads. Seeking may lead to finding, but we never completely arrive as such in this life - there is always more about God to discover. Vision is the mountain top, the destination we long to reach, to which we are journeying.

Seeking to be a **spiritual heart** because we are set in the midst of the community to make known the loving heart of God. It is our beating heart that keeps our bodies alive, so we too must keep people alive to the possibility of God. A heart gives life, a spiritual heart gives life at a time when many people are already spiritually sick or dead to the life of God.

And it is to this **neighbourhood** that we are specially called. A parish relates to a particular area, but it is people and relationships that make up the Church. Dwelling together we must always ask the question, 'Who is my neighbour?' which demands that we respond to their need. Sometimes, our neighbour may be near, sometimes they may be further away - for the heart is as large as the love that fills it.

In doing so we create **community**. It is not a given, or self-existent, but something made. God creates, and we share in that activity. God the Holy Trinity is a community of persons, and so we reflect that mutual indwelling through our life together, bound together as one.

And the marks of that community are those famously described by St Paul as **faith, hope and love**. We are here to build up faith, to give

people hope and to share love. If you're not into those things you would do well to attend another church! Paul identifies love as the greatest of all. We believe in the power of love and not the love of power. This will often put us at odds with the world and people outside the church who believes in power. We must accept that opposition and bear it as a cross with joy.

Come and join us - because the Good News is for all people. In the Gospel today Philip said to his brother Nathaniel, '*Come and see*', and through his encounter with Christ he becomes a disciple. So often, people come to church and experience God through the invitation of others. Bring your friends, family, neighbours. It also says that we are a church that is easy to join, inviting, open to new people and not only those we know already. Do you look for the new person at Mass?

Individual and corporate visions

You are here today, because in some way God has called you in the past, however that may have been.

Your personal call is the result of who you are, and how you have been shaped by God over the years.

How is he calling you today?

What from and what to?

God finds us all worthy of calling and vision.

As individuals and as a whole community.

Let us say with Samuel: '*Speak Lord, for your servant is listening*'.