

## Chester Cathedral Ordination Service July 4<sup>th</sup> 2010

### Voices in the dark

#### 1 Samuel 3: 1-10

This moment has been a long time coming.

A lot of planning, praying, hard work, upheaval has gone into the journey. Not just for those being ordained - but for their nearest and dearest too.

So can we say thank you to you all.

Thank you for your faithfulness and courage.

Thank you for submitting to the mysterious ways of the Church of England's selection and training system – as God does too.

Thank you for being willing to look and sound eccentric in a world less and less understanding of Christian faith and what makes people give themselves to the odd and costly priorities you are basing life upon.

Thank you for committing yourself to the life of a church still painfully working out its partnership of women and men in ministry.

Gathered today are people who share your faith and those whose life and experience lead them to different paths and understanding.

But we are here because we love and reverence you.

And we are very grateful for you.

#### **And where did it start?**

In the first Bible reading it was a voice in the dark.

A word of advice here - when it comes to presenting your credentials to a possible new employer 'I heard voices in the night' is not an approach recommended in any coaching manuals I know of.

But something deeper was happening then as now

Much more than a successful job interview or any usual measures of professional skills and expertise ...

This is about being called.

About hearing and recognizing the voice of God.

No two stories are alike. For over half those being ordained today can trace the first faint sense of call back 15-20 years or more.

For some here it was an unexpected but specific moment of 'knowing'.

For many a quietly growing conviction – often over many years - like a faint persistent voice, barely heard at first - but steadily awakening a new sense of direction and purpose that became quite compelling.

Those moments of awareness that prove to be life changing are often not the highly dramatic or the most obvious ones.

#### **In our first reading that voice in the night came at a particular time of need.**

The whole life of the ancient people of Israel is summed up in one sentence.

'The Word of the Lord was rare and visions scarce'.

We don't need to assume that their world was silent.

It may have been just as noisy and excitable as ours.

Or that God had stopped talking or had taken off somewhere.

There was a problem with deafness and sight.

This was an age – no matter how religious - that could no longer hear God's voice or imagine his ways and presence.  
- and so was unable to base its life on the things that really mattered and would lead to its security, flourishing and blessing.  
A kind of world in which the familiar words and signs of faith had emptied of meaning and lost their power to inspire life or purpose.

Does that sound familiar?

What sentence would sum up our times?

**I come to this story with a personal interest – I am hearing impaired.**

The technology available these days for people like me is amazing.  
But when you are fitted with new hearing aids you don't just hear what you want or need to hear - *everything* is louder.  
Flushing toilet = Niagara Falls.  
Door slamming sounds like high explosives.

You have to learn to hear all over again.  
Hearing is the not the difference between silence and sound.  
It is the ability to distinguish noise from signal.

It is the irony of our age that although the technology has never more sophisticated – we have never been deafer.  
1/7 in our country have significant hearing loss and it is increasing.  
Communication has never been more immediate but we are struggling under the burden of audio and visual overload.  
Deafened by the noise of powerful competing messages.  
We speak of noise pollution

Messages are everywhere but no one is quite sure who is saying what to who.  
Did you read of a Town Centre that had new security cameras installed – state of the art technology to improve security. The day they were switched on shoppers returning to the centre car park found the central locking systems on their cars immobilized by the camera signals. Their cars had to be towed out of range of the cameras before they could drive them at all.

Or the man walking home from the newsagent. As he nears his house a strikingly beautiful young woman passes him on the pavement. As he turns into his drive his pace maker opened the garage doors.

In the church too facing huge challenges and changes is working on a constant supply of pioneering strategies, fresh initiatives, new policies and programs ....  
It is brave and creative – and imperative - but I do come away from many briefings and training days suffering from ecclesiastical tinnitus.

And the most exhausting part of any new job is listening isn't it.  
You have to hear *everything*.  
You don't know who the idiots are or what you can kick in the long grass.

You have to learn to distinguish noise from signal

Then and now – we are a world anxiously searching for what makes for its well being but increasingly deaf to the signals in the midst of the noise.

Perhaps in a world so compulsively looking and listening to anything and everything else we can only experience God as a kind of tinnitus  
– the noise that is in fact the message.

To such a world - then and now - he comes in the night, tells it slant, in those questions you can't quite put down or answer, the moments that make you stop and look up, a curiosity that stays like an annoying itch, n joy and in pain ... never so revealed as to be obvious.

But will look back one day and realize that there wasn't *anything* that wasn't talking to us.

**To those being ordained today ...**

please leave space for a listening and watching that will always feel inefficient, inconvenient – for which there really isn't time in the diary and there will always be good reasons for postponing and avoiding.

And help us in the task of listening through all the competing noises – to hear and recognise the signal – the sounds and sights that speak of God.

For now as then, this is a world alive in God.

There is nowhere and no one he is *not* calling.

God ordains it to be so.

It is a call to unimaginable life – because God is unimaginable life

And in this calling, and this alone, lies our hope and our salvation.

Then and now – there is only one response to make is.

And we are invited to make it today .....

'Speak Lord – your servant is listening'.

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