

## MINISTRY RESOURCES FOR SUNDAY 17 JANUARY 2021

### 1 Prayers of Adoration and Confession

#### Psalm 139

O LORD, you have searched me and known me.  
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;  
*you discern my thoughts from far away.*  
You search out my path and my lying down,  
and are acquainted with all my ways.  
*Even before a word is on my tongue,  
O LORD, you know it completely.*  
You hem me in, behind and before,  
and lay your hand upon me.  
*Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;  
it is so high that I cannot attain it.*  
Where can I go from your spirit?  
*Or where can I flee from your presence?*  
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;  
*if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.*  
If I take the wings of the morning  
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,  
*even there your hand shall lead me,  
and your right hand shall hold me fast.*  
If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me,  
and the light around me become night,”  
even the darkness is not dark to you;  
*the night is as bright as the day,  
for darkness is as light to you.*  
For it was you who formed my inward parts;  
*you knit me together in my mother’s womb.*  
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.  
*Wonderful are your works;  
that I know very well.*  
My frame was not hidden from you,  
when I was being made in secret,  
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.  
*Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.*  
In your book were written  
all the days that were formed for me,  
when none of them as yet existed.  
*How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!  
How vast is the sum of them!  
I try to count them—they are more than the sand;  
I come to the end—I am still with you.*

O God, you have indeed searched and known us.  
You do indeed know our every thought, our every deed, our every impulse.  
There are no secrets that we can keep from you,  
for you know us better than we know ourselves.  
Neither the face we put on for the world, nor our self-deception,  
can ever fool you.

You know us for who we truly are.  
So we confess that truth to you and come to you for mercy.  
We are a sinful people,  
whose loving is half-hearted and conditional;  
who prefer justice to mercy, vengeance to forgiveness;  
whose first instincts are always self-serving;  
and whose concern for others is always tempered by our own self-interest.  
We are not worthy of your mercy,  
yet we come, penitently, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.  
As he died for us, so he rose for us,  
and in his blessed name, we ask your forgiveness,  
and the strength of your Spirit  
to be stronger in the future in overcoming our worst instincts.  
Amen

2 **Declaration of Forgiveness**

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us  
If we confess our sins,  
he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins  
and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.  
In the risen Lord Jesus, our sins are forgiven.  
Thanks be to God.

3 **Bible Readings –**  
I Samuel 3:1-21

4 **Sermon:** See below

5 **Prayers of the People and Lords Prayer**

Lord our God,  
As we embark on this new year of 2021,  
we pray for your blessing, your guidance and your help.  
We continue to pray for the situation regarding Covid-19 around the world.  
We give thanks that vaccines are becoming available,  
but we are ashamed that the wealthy nations of the world  
have sought to corner the market for their own citizens,  
with too little regard for nations without such great resources.  
Grant us both the wisdom and the decency to understand  
that none of us is safe until all of us are safe.  
And grant us the patience and understanding to realise  
that the necessary roll-out of the vaccines will take many months;  
that we must continue to be cautious both for our own sakes  
and for the sake of others.  
We pray for our own governments, Federal and State,  
and for the men and women who lead them,  
as they face a new year of uncertain challenges.  
But we pray particularly for the government and the people of the United States,  
who have been rocked by the violent unleashing  
of so much that is hateful and destructive in their nation.  
May the voices of decent people prevail over the strident cries,  
and the outlandish lies, of those who deny reality,  
and seek to wreak havoc and overturn order.

Bless the incoming administration of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris,  
and may they be able to unite their fractured nation behind them,  
not only for the sake of all Americans,  
but for the sake of the entire world.  
Father, we pray that this might be a year  
when there are more declarations of peace than declarations of war;  
when the countless refugees all across the world  
find succour, safety and a future of hope and promise.  
We pray that this might be the year  
when the world is galvanised into the urgent action  
required to address our climate emergency;  
when vested interests are exposed and stared down,  
when people listen to science rather than to conspiracy theories,  
and when all of us accept that we shall have to make sacrifices  
if there is to be a future worth having for our children and grandchildren.  
And finally, we pray for the prophets among us,  
who tell us the hard truths;  
and for the people who dream dreams of things that never were,  
and ask why not.  
May our hearts and minds be open to hearing their voices  
and responding to their call.  
Especially we pray for those who speak in your name,  
pointing to the Lord Jesus,  
and to the salvation which is in him and him alone.  
May 2021 be the year when we rediscover the power of your gospel,  
and the name of Jesus resonates around the world,  
bringing grace, peace, love and hope.

Our father in heaven,  
Hallowed be your name.  
Your kingdom come;  
Your will be done  
on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread,  
and forgive us our sins  
as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Save us from the time of trial  
and deliver us from evil,  
for the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,  
now and forever.  
Amen

6 **Blessing and Dismissal**

*Here I am Lord.*

*Is it I Lord?*

*I have heard you calling in the night.*

Go now in the name of Christ to love and serve the Lord,  
and to wait upon his voice –  
the voices of the prophets,  
and the voice that God speaks quietly to you.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
the love of God,  
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit  
be with you now,  
and abide with you evermore.

*Amen*

## SERMON

If you went to Sunday School, then undoubtedly you learnt about the story of the call of the prophet Samuel. There's Samuel, sleeping in the temple near the Ark of the Covenant, when God calls him by name. Three times this happens, and each time he thinks it's the High Priest, Eli, calling to him for assistance. Finally, Eli twigs that it's God who's calling to Samuel, and instructs him to stay put and listen to God's words. And so the pivotal but dangerous career of the great prophet is launched. It's a classic story of the call of God, and it makes terrific Sunday School fare. You might even remember colouring in the pictures of Eli and Samuel. But let's not leave this provocative story at that. There's more to today's passage than just a simple children's story.

The passage starts with an intriguing "editorial" comment by the redactor.

*The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.*

We're not used to reading words like that in the Bible. Especially in the Old Testament, God seems to be a pervasive ever-presence. God seems always to be there, apparently interacting with people almost constantly. In the Biblical narrative, it seems very strange to learn that, now, we have stumbled upon a time when no one heard very much from God at all.

Read any commentary on Samuel and it's *sure* to have an explanation. Most commentators are eager to *explain* everything about God. Although they'd never admit it, unconsciously, they're sure that they've got God's measure. They're sure that God works logically, according to the rules they've constructed for him. So, you'll find that the usual explanation for God's silence at this time is the sinfulness of Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, and Eli's failure to punish them for their abuse of their priestly office.

Well, maybe that's so, but I think it's a bit unlikely. Would God desert a whole people because of the sinfulness of one family, however important they may have been? And anyway, we should always be cautious when we think we've got God worked out. God is far greater than we, and to think that we can figure out the rules that govern how God acts is far more likely to be hubris on our part than any kind of real insight.

A god whom we can understand and predict is no true god at all, but the creation of our own pride.

So hear those words again:

*The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.*

Those two short clauses have a strong resonance for us, don't they? Haven't we all, from time to time, called out in frustration or despair, Where are you God? Why don't you speak? Why don't you act? Why have you gone missing in action? The fact is that God *does* choose to be silent, sometimes for long periods. And we are at a loss to explain why. During this current pandemic, countless people of faith around the world have prayed to God for deliverance, both for themselves and their families, and for their nations and the whole world. Yet millions continue to fall ill, and thousands continue to die. Why has God held back? Habit and guilt drive many Christians to the conclusion that it's because of our own sinfulness, but that's not the God revealed who is in the person of Jesus Christ. *That* God does not punish people indiscriminately because of the sin of some. And if the world *is* being punished for its sinfulness, why have *we* been so spared here in Australia? We, surely, are just as sinful as any nation.

No more should we assume that God is silent now because we have sinned, than should we assume that God was silent in Samuel's day because Eli and his sons had sinned. We don't *know* why God

at times chooses to be silent. And frankly it's good to hear that fact acknowledged in the scripture as the beginning of our passage does. There's a strange kind of comfort in hearing those words.

What we *do* know, though, is that God does not remain silent forever. Our passage is about a stirring of the divine presence. God, once more, makes himself known, this time through the young boy, Samuel.

And Samuel *was* just a boy. We don't know exactly how old he was, but the passage describes him as a "boy", and later speaks of him growing up. He may have been a teenager, or he may not even have reached that age. The point is that God chose a very young person to reveal himself to and through.

There is a lesson for us there, surely. God is ever the God of the unexpected. Culturally, *we* no more expect great revelations from the very young than did the Israelites of Eli and Samuel's day. Sadly in our society we do not have the respect for the old that is central to, say, most Asian societies, but we *do* tend to think of women and men as at the pinnacle of their career, and perhaps of their value to society, when they are in their middle age, through maybe until they're approaching retirement age or a tad older.

We *don't* expect the very young to speak with great wisdom. We don't expect it because they lack experience, because they haven't yet gained perspective, because they know little of the world and its ways. We are reluctant to take them and their ideas too seriously. We may, perhaps, invite one or two young people to join our church council, as a way of including them and training them, but we're more likely to patronise them than truly to seek their ideas and their wisdom. The adults will always hold sway on the serious decisions.

And of course that *can* be appropriate. Experience, perspective and a little worldliness *can* be very important. But so too can the innocence, the idealism and the simplicity of a young person. God chose Samuel, the young boy in the Temple to be his prophet, and

*... the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favour with the LORD and with the people.*

When I think of an inspirational young person, my mind immediately goes to Greta Thunberg, the extraordinary Swedish young woman who defiantly took on the great and mighty of the world, challenging them (and us) on behalf of an entire generation to rise to the challenge of our changing climate. No doubt as she gets older, she *will* gain wisdom, perspective and worldliness, but already the world has gained greatly from her innocence, idealism and simplicity. "How dare you!" she glared at some of the most powerful people in the world, expressing the outrage of a whole generation watching their future sacrificed on the altar of greed, inertia and denial. "How dare you!"

Some, like Donald Trump, dismissed her with contempt, because she *was* young, and because she *did* dare to tell the truth. But the *world* listened to an inspired and courageous young woman, welcoming the freshness and the honesty which were a part of her youth; – and *not* to her older, more experienced and more powerful denouncer. Greta Thunberg is, undoubtedly, exceptional, one in a million. And I'm not suggesting that she is a prophet of God, because I have no idea. But the cry she began resonated around the world, as countless young people in countless nations took to the streets to give expression to the same outrage, the same sense of injustice, the same demand that the world stop and listen and act. It was not a voice welcomed in many boardrooms or many cabinet rooms, but its clarity, its righteousness and its persistence had become a powerful force.

May we never doubt that God can and does act through young people, that God can and does use the precious characteristics of youth, which are gradually weeded out of us as we grow up and make

our way in the world. The call of Samuel reminds us of that truth, and should make us all sit up and listen, and pay heed to the wisdom and idealism which are within every one of these young people in our midst. With the late Robert Kennedy, Greta Thunberg can truly say,

*Some men see things as they are, and ask why. I dream of things that never were, and ask why not.*

We do so need to hear those whose innocence allows them to ask, “Why not?”

There’s another lesson to be had from the story of Samuel’s call too. And once again it can be illustrated from Greta Thunberg. Thunberg’s message was *not* welcome in many quarters. Because it cut through with laser precision all our compromises and excuses, all our worldly wisdom and “sense of perspective”. It was not just the leaders of governments who had forever dragged their feet on climate policy; or the corporate executives whose personal careers and companies’ wealth depended on the fossil fuel industries; or the vested interests in the automobile, shipping and aviation industries which had turned a blind eye and a deaf ear to their environmental impact – it was not just such as those who found themselves pinned and wriggling in the face of Thunberg’s rhetoric. It was every one of us who owns a motor vehicle, or who takes the prerogative to fly all over the world as our right, or who carelessly consumes power generated by coal or other fossil fuels, or who demands commodities like water – water! – bottled in Italy and shipped halfway around the world, or winter-time cherries that have to be flown in from the United States. Or a host of other behaviours which reflect our thoughtlessness, our inertia or our wanton selfishness. In short, Thunberg caught us *all* in her righteous protest. Her message was unwelcome because it was uncomfortable, but it was necessary because it was the truth. The innocence of youth can see things to which the rest of us may be blind, and say things which the rest of us would find too hard.

It was just like that with the young boy Samuel. The first pronouncement which the newly appointed prophet Samuel had to make was not an easy one. It was something which the adults around him would hesitate to proclaim. The High Priest, Eli, was Samuel’s guardian and mentor. Samuel had been surrendered to Eli to work in the Temple as a thanksgiving to God for his miraculous birth. While it would be unfair to say that his parents had abandoned him, in reality, Eli had been more of a parent to the young boy than anyone else. Yet Samuel was charged by God with a dire pronouncement against Eli and his family, with saying something which nobody else would have dared to say.

*Then the LORD said to Samuel, “See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. On that day I will fulfil against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli’s house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever.”*

This was a tough gig for the young Samuel – to have to pronounce God’s judgment upon his adoptive father! It wasn’t even a call to repentance. ... *the iniquity of Eli’s house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever.* Eli, there is nothing you can do. God has made up his just mind, and God will surely do what he has decided.

In fact we know that this prophecy was not new to Eli – he had been told much the same previously, and his reaction to Samuel was far more benign than it might have been. But Samuel couldn’t have known that, and what God asked of him was hard. It was a message that was scarcely going to be welcome. Pronouncing it could be dangerous as well as difficult.

There are many instances in the Old Testament of prophets with difficult messages to deliver. Think

for example of Jeremiah. Think of Jonah. That's the other lesson from the story of the call of Samuel. What God has to say to us will often not be welcome news. We should not expect the voice of the Lord always to be soothing and gentle. God calls out the injustices in the world. God advocates on behalf of the poor, the marginalised, and the disadvantaged. God's cries for justice will call out all who are complicit in the inequalities of the world. There will be courage in those who bring God's message to us, for theirs is not an easy task. And sometimes they *will* be the young, who dare to dream of things that never were, and ask why not.

The story of the call of Samuel is far from being just the stuff of Sunday School narratives. It has some important reminders for us all, reminders that should shake us out of our inertia, our self-satisfaction, and our complacency.

And yet the story of the small child who was called to speak God's truth to the world surely has another resonance for us too, so soon after Christmas. Christmas is the celebration of the birth of another miraculous child. At his baptism, the Holy Spirit descended upon that now grownup child, who was the Lord Jesus Christ; and Jesus began a ministry like no other. In him, wrote John, were grace and truth; *in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.*

And while the truths that Jesus told were not comfortable; while the powers that be were certainly stirred up by the pronouncements and challenges of Jesus; while, like Samuel, Jesus certainly was not called to affirm the world as it was, but in fact to turn the world completely on its head; nevertheless, in Jesus, alongside such truth-telling was also grace.

*Indeed, writes John again, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

The gospel is not that God raises up prophets to condemn the world. We do need to be open to hearing the words of the prophets in our midst. The story of Samuel reminds us that those prophets may well be the very young, whose innocence reveals truths hidden from those of us who are older; and that the words of the prophets may well be very hard for us to hear. So much we learn from the story of Samuel's call.

But the gospel is that the same God who proclaims the difficult truths, whose light shines into the darkness and exposes our sinfulness and brokenness, is the God who reaches out to us with grace and love and compassion. The trouble with the story of the call of Samuel, as we tell it to our children, is that it leads only to the justice of God. But thanks be to the God whom we worship that he is a God whose justice is tempered by mercy, and whose righteous anger dissolves into inexplicable grace and love. And that is a story worth telling, not only to our children, but to anyone who will listen.

Amen