



17th January 2021

This short act of worship has been prepared for you to use while you are unable to attend worship in a church building.

Call to worship:

Holy one, who call us to pause
and take our rest in you,
free us for awhile
from the pressure to be productive,
and let us find simple joy in your
presence,
delighting that you come to us
and dwell among us
as our most dearly beloved. Amen

Hymn: StF 161. Speak, O Lord

Speak, O Lord, as we come to you
to receive the food of your holy word.
Take your truth, plant it deep in us;
shape and fashion us in your likeness,
that the light of Christ might be seen
today
in our acts of love and our deeds of
faith.
Speak, O Lord, and fulfil in us
all your purposes for your glory.

Teach us Lord, full obedience,
holy reverence, true humility.
Test our thoughts and our attitudes
in the radiance of your purity.
Cause our faith to rise, cause our eyes
to see
your majestic love and authority.
Words of power that can never fail;
let their truth prevail over unbelief.

Speak, O Lord, and renew our minds;
help us grasp the heights of your plans
for us.
truths unchanged from the dawn of
time
that will echo down through eternity.
And by grace we'll stand on your
promises,
and by faith we'll walk as you walk
with us.
Speak, O Lord, till your church is built
and the earth is filled with Your glory

Keith Getty & Stuart Townend

Prayers

Eternal God,
you do not need our praise.
The world tells of your glory...
sunrise and birdsong,
the ruggedness of landscape,
the randomness of rain,
the beauty for the eye,
nourishment for the body, music for
the soul.
These speak of your goodness,
these honour your name.

You do not need our praise.

Other places can do it better
with finer music or fewer words,
with centuries of tradition
or buildings of rare beauty.
Other people can do it better,
where two or three are gathered
who live in poverty or under threat,
and who, despite all that oppresses
them,
rejoice to be called your own.

What can we add
by way of magnificence or testimony
when these are more eloquent?

You do not need our praise,
but we need to praise you.
It is the restlessness
which you have planted in us.
It is our desire for a true home
and unconditional acceptance
that brings us here.

All the rumours we have heard about
you
are true:

you love,
you forgive,
you transform.

And you know us,
oh, how you know us.
You perceive what in us needs to be
loved,
what in us needs to be forgiven,
and what in us needs to be changed.

We need no more words,
just penitence.

(pause)

These are the words of Jesus.
They are strong and true, so believe
them:

'I have come
that you may have life in all its
fullness.'

'Go in peace; your sins are forgiven.
Come, each one, and follow me.'

(pause)

Now, God,
help us to live as a forgiven people –
visibly different,
gloriously free,
for Jesus' sake.
Amen

Reading: 1 Samuel 3:1-10

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.

2 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. ¹⁰ Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, 'Samuel! Samuel!' And Samuel said, 'Speak, for your servant is listening.'

Time to reflect

I write this a few hours after seeing the horrifying sights at the US Capitol building with rioters acting with violence having been encouraged by their President to break the law. Upon reading this passage from Samuel, I was immediately struck by that opening verse: 'The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread,' and felt that sentiment could easily be applied to today.

At first glance, it seems the evidence for God is scant. The pandemic in this country is worse than it has ever been. School students are once again in a

state of confusion and anxiety over their grades; teaching staff are exhausted, the NHS is on its knees, inequality is on the increase, foodbank dependency is escalating. And all of this in the middle of winter where darkness is stronger than light.

But let's stay with this passage a little longer and see what treasure it might reveal. These two phrases about God's word being rare and visions not widespread do not occur anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible. The rarity is emphasising something precious, akin to a jewel, and certainly something extremely valuable, not to be taken for granted. Is the word of God something we see as being precious and not to be taken for granted? Something to be treasured or celebrated? Some of these stories, and this one about Samuel's calling, may feel so familiar to us that we lose any sense of wonder. Familiarity, after all, can breed contempt. Instead, rather than with the dim eyes of Elijah, perhaps we could try looking at God's word with the youthful eyes of Samuel, able to be surprised at encountering God.

In his book, *God of Surprises*, Gerard Hughes writes, 'God...is a beckoning word. He calls us out of ourselves and beyond ourselves, he is the God of surprises, always creating anew.' I find the idea of God as a beckoning word interesting. It suggests God invites rather than insists; encourages rather than orders. In our story God

beckoned Samuel, and when Samuel got confused, God persisted. God didn't give up on him just because he looked in the wrong place and didn't recognise God. But, of course, God is found in surprising places, and perhaps God is found today in the hard work of hospital staff, in the kindness of strangers, in the reassurance of teachers, in those brave enough to speak out against hatred.

If we were to read on, we would find Samuel didn't stay in a state of listening. He heard God's word, and that caused him to start to speak. He spoke words of truth, not always popular, and we are told God 'let none of his words fall to the ground.' (3:19). Samuel became a prophet and learned that justice is an act of prayer performed by a faithful community.

So I invite you to consider these questions:

- Do you think God's word is rare in today's world?
- What gems have you discovered in our Bible reading today?
- Where might God be calling you?
- Are you willing to listen, and then speak, and then act?

Prayers of intercession

At the moment we are instructed to stay at home, but in our prayers I

invite you to go on an imaginary journey.

Let's set off: Imagine you are stepping out of your home and looking around you, seeing the familiar sights, other houses, fields maybe, the places where your neighbours live. Some of them you know, some of them you know only by sight and some are strangers. Ordinary people with ordinary joys and sorrows. Pray for your neighbours.

Keep going, into your town and local shops. Past the harassed parent trying to keep their children occupied; past the teenager on their bike; see the old man – his steps slow and laboured, see the woman in her business suit in a tremendous rush, see the dishevelled young man counting pennies to pay for a cup of tea. Each one you pass has worries, some of them minor, some of them overwhelming. Pray for those in need in your town.

Venture further now into a city, unusually quiet with workplaces empty and restaurants shut. See the wealth, the status symbols. Notice the poverty living cheek-by-jowl. Pray for those struggling with the pressures of modern life and the economic consequences of the pandemic.

Take a moment to pause by a hospital. See the nurses at the end of their shift, tired and requiring rest. Smell the smoke floating from some people by the entrance, their addiction in conflict with their desire for health. Wander

inside, past wards, operating theatres, maternity suites, radiotherapy units. Pray for those inside this building, whether through their occupation, their own health, or their families.

Take a longer trip, chose a country to visit. So many unsafe places in comparison to our own homes. Hear the noises of war, the cries of malnourished children, the sobs of the recently bereaved. Allow your hearts to reach out in tenderness despite feelings of powerlessness and pray for those in almost unimaginable need.

Finally, look at the cross. Notice the place where Jesus died, sharing in the worlds pain, showing us that life is stronger than death, that God's love reaches the darkest places. Feel that love radiating, giving hope, giving strength, giving life. And in response to this, give God your thanks, your love, your life.



We draw all of these prayers together as we say The Lord's Prayer...

Hymn: StF 563. O Jesus I have promised

O Jesu, I have promised
to serve you to the end;
Lord, be for ever near me,
my master and my friend;
I shall not fear the battle
if you are by my side,
nor wander from the pathway
if you will be my guide.

O let me feel you near me;
the world is ever near;
I see the sights that dazzle,
the tempting sounds I hear;
my foes are ever near me,
around me and within;
but, Jesus, now draw nearer,
and shield my soul from sin.

O let me hear you speaking
in accents clear and still,
above the storms of passion,
the murmurs of self-will;
O speak to reassure me,
to hasten or control;
Lord, speak, and make me listen,
O guardian of my soul.

O Jesus, you have promised
to all who follow you,
that where you are in glory
your servant shall be too;
and, Jesus, I have promised
to service you to the end;
O give me grace to follow
my master and my friend.

John Earnest Bode

Blessing

May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, So that we may live deep within the heart of God.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, So that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger and war, So that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and to turn their pain to joy.

And may God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, So that you can do what others claim cannot be done, To bring justice and kindness to all our children and the poor.

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