

Homily for The Second Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B) (17th January 2021)

Once the people of Israel arrive in the Promised Land, a land that is now their own, they have no more need for wandering. And so the Tent of Meeting, the portable shrine that housed the Ark of The Covenant, the Ark that contains the Tablets of Stone, inscribed by God with the Ten Commandments and given to Moses, also needs to wander no more. It can be placed in a permanent shrine. Later it will be placed in the great Temple in Jerusalem, but as yet Jerusalem has not been made the centre of the nation's life. And so the Tent, and the Ark, are kept in a shrine at Shiloh, and that is where our First Reading takes place.

The shrine at Shiloh is cared for by Eli the priest, and his two sons, also priests, Hophni and Phinehas. But the two young men have long since abandoned any idea of service, and for them the priesthood is a way of living the high life. They take the best meat that is brought for sacrifice, and grow fat on it themselves: not only does this rob God of what is his due, but in preventing people from sacrificing the meat they stop people from building up their own relationship with God. They do the worst thing a priest can ever do: they become an obstacle separating people from God, rather than a bridge that connects them. And as if that were not enough they sleep with the women who minister at the shrine. They are about as bad as priests could get. And Eli, their old father, complains and criticises, but he does not stop them. By the time of our story we are told that the word of the Lord is rare, and visions were uncommon (1 Sam. 3.1). The lamp of God has not yet gone out, but it has grown very dim. While the two young men are off doing whatever pleases them, only the old man and the young boy remain at the shrine, Samuel, who was left there by his mother. Samuel's mother, Hannah, came each year to the shrine and one year she prayed there for a son. Eli had already sunk low, and when he sees her lips moving under her breath he assumes she is drunk, when in fact she is begging God for a child. When the child, Samuel, is born she vows to present him to God, and once he is weaned she takes him and leaves him there with Eli. Now young boy and old man oversee the shrine, the shrine whose custodians have grown so lax that the word is seldom heard and visions are never seen. There is little expectation that much will happen, which is why neither Eli nor Samuel realise at first what is going on.

Into the unpromising darkness and silence the Lord speaks, calling out with increasing urgency: Samuel, Samuel. Somehow the presence of this child, this promised child, this gift given to God, awakens something in Eli, awakens some shadow, some memory of holiness like a voice speaking across the years from his younger self, from the young Eli who once burned with passion for God, before tiredness and cynicism mastered him, and Eli the old and blind sees and hears what is afoot. All through the wandering in the desert the Ark was the guide and the protection of the people, but now it languishes in Shiloh, not exactly forgotten, but no longer treasured. Some memory of priestliness stirs in Eli and he puts Samuel in touch with God, he tells him what to say, and when Samuel does as he is told he is set on the path of prophecy by God. The first message he receives, however, is a message of doom for Eli and his sons, and before long the three of

them are dead. Now it is Samuel who receives, interprets, and passes on the prophecies of God.

What does this story tell us about God's dealings with his people? It tells us that all people share a priestly role, the role of putting other people in touch with God; that is part of what it means to be a follower of Christ. If, like Eli's sons, we squander the chance to do that, or worse still stand between people and God, then we have betrayed our very reason for living. The story also shows us that the presence of one innocent, uncorrupted, hopeful and open soul can be a window through which God can enter even the most unpromising situation. If it were not for Samuel, Shiloh might have continued silent and dark, but his innocence and openness of heart are a window through which the Spirit pours in. And the story shows us that even the most tired and cynical soul, battered by disappointments and failure, still carries within it the embers of divine life. Samuel's innocence awakens in Eli some memory of holy passion, so that he is able, against all the odds, to play his part in a restoration of faith in Israel.

It's a great story, and it will have its own message for each of us, but above all it is a story of hope, of God's ability to breath new life into seeming failure, his ability to reawaken even the most jaded soul, and of the fruits that may be borne when we do as we were always meant to do, and put one another in touch with the living God.