

“Lying Down to Listen”, a sermon preached by Kerry Enright in Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 18 January 2015, Epiphany 2. The readings were from I Samuel 3:1-20 and John 1:43-51

1. The movie version of Witi Ihimaera’s novel *Whale Rider* portrays the tension between twelve-year-old Pai and her grandfather Koro.

Pai believes she is called to be chief but her grandfather believes only men can be chiefs. The chief should be the first-born grandson, a direct male descendant of Paikea, who rode on top of a whale from Hawaiki.

The movie portrays the back and forth, the to and fro between granddaughter and grandfather. Each has affection for the other, but the grandfather resists the granddaughter’s claims.

He thinks she is responsible for much going wrong in the tribe.

Pai is determined and she starts learning the skills of leadership – the songs and dances.

She decides to learn how to use a taiaha, traditionally reserved for males. She secretly follows Koro's lessons. He is furious when he finds out, especially when she wins the taiaha fight. Then she finds the whale tooth he threw into the ocean – the task to prove who is worthy of being a leader. Then she leads a pod of whales back to sea, like Paikea of old.

Eventually the old man comes to see that Pai is the appointed leader and he seeks her forgiveness.

It’s a story played out in many settings generation by generation.

What Koro conveyed to Pai was a posture, a posture of respect, of valuing what had been received, of knowing what was essential.

But then he had to learn that it would take a new form in a new generation.

2. Eli and Samuel have the same kind of back and forth.

The story starts with Samuel mistaking God’s voice for Eli’s voice.

Three times Samuel hears his name being called – “Samuel, Samuel” - three times – and three times he runs to Eli, to the voice he knows, the voice he trusts, the voice he has heard for so long.

Three times Eli says, “No I didn’t call, go lie down.”

The breakthrough comes when Eli tells Samuel to lie down and to say – “Speak Lord for your servant is listening.”

We can get form and essence mixed up, so we imagine the essence can only come in a certain form, from a certain voice, in a certain way.

Eli's gift to Samuel is the gift of listening to God in Samuel's way, not Eli's way.

3. We all need mentors, people who share what they have learned from their experience.

They give us wisdom beyond our years, beyond our experience.

But the value of mentors is not that they tell us how we are to live.

Their value is to give us a posture, an approach, so we can live our own lives.

4. The story is told of the person who fell down a well.

At the bottom of the well they had a religious experience that changed their life.

They spent the rest of their life pushing people down wells.

5. Parent and child need to know the difference between form and essence.

My father told me never to trust the British. "Remember the Black and Tans" he would say. Our family left Ireland in 1864! Now I am sure he did not expect me to distrust every English person, but he did expect me to know my heritage and to have a sense of who held power and how they exercised it.

What I learned from my parents was a posture, an approach.

There came a time when I chose a path to which my father was very opposed. Later in life he saw I was living out the essence of what my parents had gave me, and I needed to do it in my way.

The danger is that if we insist our children live our way, we lose the ability to influence their posture, their approach.

The same is true of all our mentors, whether they be ministers, or churches or teachers.

6. Posture is the gift churches share.

Our calling is not to train our children in a particular form or style or theology.

Our calling is that of Eli: to imbue in our children a posture, so that in every stage of their lives, in every place they live, they find a community of faith where they can say, every day of their lives –

"Speak Lord, your servant is listening."

7. It's not always easy making the transition from Eli.

Forty years ago there was a remarkable transition in the Presbyterian Church of Ghana.

The Church had been established in the 1800s by Swiss missionaries from the Basel Mission.

For over a hundred years the Ghanaian Church sang Basel hymns from an African translation of the Basel hymnbook.

Young people especially found the rhythms and the style difficult, the dour and pedestrian patterns tiring.

Then in the early 1970s a renewal movement swept through the Church.

Within a decade the Church adopted indigenous practices, especially dancing.

What was deep in the Ghanaian soul was able to find expression in worship.

They were freed to say in their place, in their language, in their rhythms –

“Speak Lord, your servant is listening.

The essence remained; the form changed.

They received Eli’s gift and didn’t need to go to Eli any longer.

8. We in New Zealand are still on that journey.

We as a Church are still learning to receive Eli’s gift.

The temptation is to replace one Eli with another, simply to turn from Britain to another continent.

I find it interesting, that of all the Christmas music we sang late last year, the piece most people spoke most positively about was Karen’s composition of the Song of Mary.

Its style was New Zealand. It spoke to their spirits.

9. It’s tough though when God speaks to the older one through the younger one.

For too long Eli had allowed his sons to turn the house of Yahweh into a brothel.

Israel had got into a terrible state.

People did not value what was valuable. They did what was right in their own eyes.

And Eli had let it happen. He had had the opportunity to do something but he didn’t.

Samuel didn’t want to say this to Eli. He felt awkward and diffident. His ears tingled.

But Eli had the maturity to invite it; “Do not hide bad news from me.”

Those of us who have lived a while know this tension almost every day.

We invested our lives in this or that, but we did not do everything well. We did not see everything we could have seen. We did not have all the insights of a newer generation with sometimes greater awareness. We lived in our age with the limitation of our own gifts and perspective.

That is life.

10. So we come to the invitation in these words.

To take up the posture our mentors encouraged, our forebears left us.

Not to run to and from Eli.

Rather to lie down in our place, in our skin, for the voice that is for us.

And to say with all that we are – “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

As individuals.

As church now. Not the church of ten years ago, or twenty years ago. Now.

Receiving from Eli; listening for God.