

We each have a facility within us for discerning God's will but it needs cultivating and protecting. It needs cultivating because, like all senses, it will atrophy without use. It needs protection because there are many other voices seeking to claim its attention. Innocence is a good start and enables Samuel here to be especially receptive but most of us will have to reclaim this innocence later, having wandered away from that first fresh receptivity, full of false ideas and opinions, marred by sin. This is where Paul is starting from in his harsh words to the Corinthians; harsh words driven by his own experience of being distant from God's will. And it's also where God is starting from with Eli: that is, God's experience of Israel's wandering away from true worship, though in the excerpt given us today we may not discern the seriousness of Samuel's call. He's being used to condemn Eli's laxness and failure to reprove his sons and his people. Fortunately, Eli has enough grace to go along with this, his facility to discern God's will not yet entirely blunted:

Go and lie down, and, if someone calls, say, 'Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.'

He's going along with his own nemesis, and salvation.

Samuel grew up and the Lord was with him and let no word of his fall to the ground.

In John's very controlled reconstruction of the call of the first disciples, we may, perhaps, be hearing a distant echo of this in John the Baptist's willingness to redirect his own disciples. John's receptivity to the Spirit is sufficient for him to discern that his own role is now over. There is someone else present who needs to be heard. This subtle awareness that we ourselves are not the be-all and end-all of all truth is what being 'Church' is all about – our discernment of spirits needs one another. A major theme of Pope Francis's recent book *Let Us Dream* is precisely this discernment of spirits in the service of one another. How do we know that we are acting truly, that what we do and say is in accordance with God's will? Here's a taste of it:

Be careful of those who claim now to see the future with a kind of clarity and security. In crises 'false Messiahs' always appear who ignore the freedom of the people to build their own future, and who close themselves to the action of God entering into the life and history of his people. God acts in the simplicity of open hearts, in the patience of those who pause until they can see clearly. (p.61)

What Samuel and the Corinthians and John the Baptist's disciples are being called into is an open and creative relationship which will be difficult, requiring patience and the steady endurance of suffering, but ultimately liberating, leading to a freedom quite unlike that of the Corinthians and the promise of so many 'false Messiahs'. But as Pope Francis goes on to ask:

How do we distinguish the spirits? They speak different languages; they use different ways to reach our hearts. The voice of God never imposes but proposes ('Come and see'), whereas the enemy is strident, insistent and even monotonous. (This is what you must believe). An ancient term for the devil is the Great Accuser. Here in verbal violence, in defamation, and in superfluous cruelty, we find his cave. It's best not to enter. You don't argue or dialogue with the Accuser, because that is to adopt his logic, in which spirits are disguised as reasons. You need to resist him with other means, throwing him out as Jesus did. Like coronavirus, if the virus of polarisation cannot transfer from heart to heart, it gradually disappears.

So, without, I hope, being too partisan or premature, it's goodbye Trump and a cautious welcome to Biden, tried and tested in the crucible of God's love.
It's a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (Heb.10:31)

— which can of course go either way.