

SERMON for Epiphany 2 - January 17th, 2021.

Readings: 1 Samuel 3: 1-10; Psalm 139: 1-5, 12-18; 1Corinthians 6: 12-20; John 1: 43-51.

We are now in the season of Epiphany and the theme of this season is 'revelation', manifestation or enlightenment [*in Denmark, hence the star which continues to be*] – a light which shines and brings a deeper understanding to our faith.

Last week we saw Jesus 'revealed' as the beloved Son of God at his baptism. This week we explore God's call on **our** lives, and in the Old Testament and Gospel readings we hear something of humanity's reluctance or inability to hear and respond to that call.

In the first reading, God calls the child Samuel. Samuel lived at a time when visions or experiences of God were not common, when the people of Israel had forgotten how to listen for the voice of their God or look for signs of God's presence. Those trained or expected to do so, were not hearing anything ... or not listening! They were just going through the motions and sometimes making a mockery of it.

Samuel, the boy who himself was an answer to prayer, would grow into a man who would be one of the most powerful and influential prophets in the history of Judaism. It was he who became the king maker and breaker, the prophet through whom God chose first Saul, then David to be king of the Israelites. Now, right at the beginning, as a child, God calls to him in the night. Samuel's response - with a little help from his guardian and mentor, Eli, is 'Here I am' - a slightly sanitized version of; 'yes, what do you want?'

Samuel represents the clean slate, the fresh start, the one who would get the unruly people of God back on track. He hears the call and responds, 'Speak Lord, your servant is listening.' Clear, open, responsive ... and obedient. ¹ Even as a child he was open to the uncomfortable truths – the passage goes on with God telling him to confront Eli about his two disrespectful and corrupt sons.

Jesus' call to follow sometimes met with slightly different responses!

First, we hear of Philip's immediate positive response to Jesus' call, but when Philip goes and tells his mate, Nathanael, we hear something of the cynicism and the prejudices which abound in Jesus' day, just as they do today - "can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

As I was pondering this reading, it struck me for the first time the underlying humour here. It was like a bit of banter going on between Jesus and Nathanael!

"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

"Ah, here comes a true Israelite!"

"You talking about me? How do you know me?"

In Jesus' day, Nazareth wasn't the most salubrious place to come from. For one, it housed a Roman garrison, but it was also on the trading routes which wound their way through the Fertile Crescent in the Middle East and so there were many Gentiles in the town.

Every nation tends to have a bias, whether it is the Australian/New Zealand, USA/Canada, South Africa/Zimbabwe or anyone v England! Then of course, there is still a little of the "wrong side of the tracks" mentality in some places.

There are places in our culture we tend to make fun of, be negative about or just plain prejudiced against. We all hold biases to a greater or lesser extent. Sometimes these prejudices can cloud our judgement, make us miss things, and some we may not even be aware of.

Despite his cynicism, Nathanael goes with Philip to find out what all the fuss is about. On meeting Jesus, he is impressed and responds: "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"

Our Psalm this morning holds a very special place in my heart. I think I may have shared before my experience of sitting with this psalm for a whole day whilst on an Ignatian retreat. While some may find it a bit confronting, for me, it affirms that God knows me totally, from the knitting together of my limbs in my mother's womb to all my decision making processes. How awesome is that ... how confronting and embarrassing too! Yet God is not put off by what he sees in us and calls us still!

Years ago, someone said: 'God loves us for who we are, warts and all, yet he loves us too much to leave us that way!' As we respond to God's calling, we will find ourselves changed by the experience.

God's call may come to us in so many different ways. It may be the quickening of the heart, a thought which comes "out of left field" or the wise words from a friend ... or even a stranger! The call we receive is as varied and as individual as we are.

The young Samuel thought it was Eli calling him. For Nathanael, it was the words from his friend Philip who led him to the Lord. If you made a study of people's calls in the Bible, you would find that there was no hard and fast way in which God calls people to come into a relationship with him, and that after all, is what it is about.

There is nothing under the sun which we can do or fail to do which will separate us from God's love. God calls us into a relationship with God's self, it is up to us whether or not we chose to respond. We can't earn that relationship by doing anything spectacular, it is offered to all of us, we only have to have ears to hear and hearts open to receive.

God loves us, and that is the gospel God wants taken out into the world - it is that simple. The gospel of love, of acceptance, of hope.

Somehow, we have made something so simple into something so difficult. Why is it so hard to love and accept each other? Why do we get caught up in petty behaviours, prejudices, cynicism or drawn by a need for power? We see the effect of Jesus' call on Nathanael – from his initial cynical response, he responds in faith: "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"

A companion word in this season of Epiphany is 'witness'. The revelations of faith are not always obvious, and they need to be witnessed to, to be shared, spoken of.

This is something we often shy away from, thinking we need great and mighty words to tell of what we have seen, experienced or understood. We are wrong! Philip's words to Nathanael can't be more simple: "Come and see"! It invites. It doesn't coerce, argue or belittle the faith of another ... it simply invites ² and it is the work of the Spirit which then takes over, not us! We are simply called to invite another to experience the good news of the Gospel.

There is a prayer in our prayer book; [one which incidentally was involved in my call to this Parish!] it is a prayer for the call to discipleship, but I think it sums up what we are all called to:

Christ, whose insistent call disturbs our settled lives:
give us discernment to hear your word,
grace to relinquish our tasks,
and courage to follow empty-handed wherever you may lead,
so that the voice of your gospel may reach to the ends of the earth. Amen. ³

It is the knowledge of God's love which we take out with us when we leave this place. The knowledge that we are truly loved and the willingness to share that good news with all we meet. Amen.

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REFERENCES:

1. from a sermon by Rev. Beth W. Johnston *Calling All Disciples* as posted on *midrash* in 2009.
2. Fred B. Craddock *Preaching through the Christian Year B* p. 81
3. from APBA pages 210-211.