

Come & see, go & tell
Epiphany 2
21 January 2018
Revd Jenny Wilkens
1 Samuel 3:1-10
John 1: 43-51



http://www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz/sermons_pid_22.html

Two of the themes of the Epiphany season come together in our readings today. Following Jesus' baptism and launch into ministry, he first of all calls people to **come and see**, to come and experience for themselves who he is and the good news of the promised reign of God, which he both proclaims and embodies. Jesus calls people to himself, and invites them to live alongside him as his disciples, to follow him. Then he gradually equips them and gives them specific tasks to do in his name, to **go and tell** of Christ through word and action.

God has always been in the business of calling people, speaking to them, equipping them for service and then sending them out to share the good news of the love of God with others.

But in both our stories today, those who were called needed some help in listening and responding to what was actually being said to them. Others were involved alongside them and had a role to play too.

The call of Samuel is a lovely story, a favourite of many of us probably since Sunday School days, and one that I remember being fascinated by as a little girl. Could God really speak to such a young child and call him to a specific task and purpose? Called by God in the night, Samuel initially assumes it is the old priest, Eli his mentor, calling out to him. Outside his experience, it doesn't occur to him that the call might be coming from God. And Eli? He is old and blind, and from what we hear of him, we would say he has 'gone off the boil'. His dynasty of priestly sons were exploiting their father's weak position to enrich and gratify themselves, while exploiting the people. There is the poignant "the word of the Lord was rare in those days, visions were not widespread". Eli possibly had not heard God's voice for some time. Eventually though Eli cottons on to what is happening and is able to advise the boy Samuel how to respond.

Today's reading ends with Samuel's response to God, "Speak, for your servant is listening." That's usually where our Sunday School story ends. But if we read on, we find this is no easy call to glory.

The next morning Samuel is reluctant to tell Eli about his strange conversation with God in the middle of the night, and with good reason. The message he has received, and must pass on to Eli, is that Eli is doomed; he and his family will be punished; his dynasty come to an end. Not an easy message for a young child to give to his teacher and mentor. And yet, by the grace of God, Samuel remains with Eli, and grows up in the temple under Eli's tutelage. Where Eli has failed with his own family, he is given another chance to mentor and instruct Samuel as he grows into his prophetic and priestly ministry, such that Samuel becomes a trustworthy prophet of the Lord, and God does not let any of his words fall to the ground (1 Samuel 3:19,20).

And so to the Gospel of John, John who proclaims the Word made flesh. Today's short passage continues a story that begins with John the Baptist pointing out Jesus as the Lamb of God. This identification causes two of John the Baptist's disciples to follow Jesus. One of them, **Andrew**, immediately goes to tell his brother **Simon** about this new rabbi on the scene. To him, Jesus gives the name of Cephas, **Peter**. But now in today's Gospel, it is **Philip** who is the first in John's Gospel to be specifically sought out and called by Jesus to follow him. Philip's first reaction is to find **Nathanael** – presumably a close friend, maybe even his brother. He identifies Jesus in language that is thick with theological allusion – “we have found the one about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote.” But when he hears where Jesus comes from, Nathanael scoffs – *can anything good come out of Nazareth?* The scorn in Nathanael's words rings in our ears, like the comment about certain Caribbean and African countries allegedly made by the US president the other week.

Notice too a later comment in John's Gospel as the crowds discuss whether Jesus is the Messiah: ‘Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he? (John 7: 52)

I think there's a lesson to learn from Philip here. Rather than taking on Nathanael in an all out battle over which place is better or worse in the top towns of Galilee contest, rather than getting into an argument, Philip says simply Come and see. Come and see Jesus, experience him for yourself. Jesus too doesn't buy into the argument or become all offended or try to defend his hometown. Rather he turns Nathanael's rather cynical and sceptical comment into a compliment! Ah Jesus says, I can see you are someone who tells it how you see it, you talk straight from the shoulder – here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit, we would say you tell it

how it is, no spin doctoring. For those with ears to hear, there is an implicit comparison drawn with the ancestor of Israel, Jacob who was known for his deceitful wiles and shifty ways.

Nathanael's a bit taken aback by this. Where did you come to know me? He doesn't deny what Jesus has said, indeed he accepts Jesus' assessment.

Jesus comes out with one of those pieces of foreknowledge of which John's Gospel is fond: I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.

Apparently St Augustine took this to mean that Nathanael was a sinful man as he got all tangled up in the idea of Nathanael there lurking among the fig leaves – Augustine didn't get everything right!

But what a dramatic shift we see in Nathanael – again he speaks it how he sees it, but says much more than he knows: Rabbi, you are the Son of God, you are the King of Israel.

Like Thomas there is that quicksilver shift from scepticism to worship, from doubt to faith. The only other time we hear of Nathanael is in John 21 post-resurrection when we hear that he is among the group of disciples who return to their fishing – has Nathanael returned to his doubts? Yet Jesus will reveal himself to them over breakfast – and we hear they knew it was the Lord.

What about Philip? It is Philip to whom Jesus turns when confronted with the enormous task of feeding the Five Thousand (6:5); Philip with a Greek name is approached by the Greeks asking to see Jesus (12:21), and it is Philip who on the night of the Last Supper asks Jesus to show them the Father (14:8). He continues to have that role of go-between, to speak on behalf of others, to advocate for them.

Samuel in the night wondering whose voice is calling him; Nathanael with his initial scepticism – each called by God; and each helped to a point of understanding and response to God, by another.

Some questions for us today:

- Whose voice or voices do we listen to in our day?
- How successfully do we discern the 'voice of God' given the cacophony of sounds constantly around us?
- Who has helped you hear more clearly the voice of God, to discern more deeply, and so follow more nearly the call of God in your life? And is that something you can do for someone else, be that person to bounce things off, to listen and give your full attention in a world that flitters from one thing to the next?

I was interested to learn that the Chinese monogram character for 'listen' includes the symbols for the **ear**, the **eyes** and the **heart**, and a single line indicating **undivided attention**.

As we listen today and each day for God's call on our lives, may we do so with our undivided attention, using ears, eyes and heart.

May that listening lead to a whole-hearted response to God in Christ's service.

Let's end with the well-known prayer of St Richard of Chichester:

*O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,
may I know thee more clearly,
love thee more dearly
and follow thee more nearly, day by day. Amen.*

(some of this adapted from a sermon by Dean Frank Nelson, St Peter's Adelaide, January 14, 2018, with thanks)