

Sermon for 19th January 2009

(1 Samuel 3:1-10, John 1:47-53)

Our two readings this morning were both about God calling people: first the calling of Samuel and second the calling of Nathaniel. Both of readings will be familiar to many of you I'm sure, but this morning I want to look at look at them from what I hope will be a less obvious perspective. I want to focus on one similarity: that in both stories there was a character who helped someone else to hear God's call.

For Samuel, it was Eli who recognised something was going on and that it might actually be God that was calling Samuel.

For Nathaniel, it was Philip who was himself called by Jesus, and realised that Nathaniel ought to meet Jesus as well.

There's a message here for us all. I hope you realise that God calls all of us. God has a plan for everybody. Not just those who come to church, not just people who call themselves Christians – everybody! The tricky bit is listening for God and picking out God's messages to us from all the other noise around us.

There is a really important role that we can play, as a church community, quietly and prayerfully discerning not only our own calling, but helping those around us to see and hear God. I wonder if you have ever thought of yourself in that role?

Could you be like Eli?

Eli was probably in his 80s and I wouldn't be at all surprised to learn that at other times Samuel, like any other 12-year-old boy was a bit of a handful. I could imagine Eli, old and half-blind, got pretty fed up with this boy waking him up three times in the middle of the night. It would be understandable if Eli sent him back to bed with a flea in his ear! Yet Eli had enough wisdom and presence of mind to resist the obvious, and say "Look, Samuel, if this happens again, this is what you do ...". Eli played a vital role, nurturing the boy Samuel – mentored him if you like – and this turned out to be his greatest work for God.

Or could you be like Philip?

Jesus asks him to 'follow me' and the next thing we hear, Philip goes and finds Nathaniel and says to Nathaniel "come and see who I've found". I found myself wondering: why did Philip seek out Nathaniel? Why not his parents/family/local Rabbi? Why did he go to anyone at all, rather than just follow Jesus? After all, when you've been called by this amazing, charismatic, Jesus person, why go off to find your mate Nathaniel?

I concluded that Philip must have known Nathaniel well, and when he saw Jesus, he reckoned Nathaniel was bound to be interested. A bit like the old adverts for the Royal Mail: "I saw this and thought of you" moments.

Like Philip, each of us has a calling, but it's also part of our job as people of faith, to bring others to faith. Philip must have seen something in Jesus that he thought his friend Nathaniel would be interested to see as well.

So much for what Eli and Philip DID do in their role as intermediary. But there was also something that Eli and Philip did NOT do. They recognised that God might be calling Samuel/Nathaniel, but they did NOT try to work out what God was saying.

Ultimately each of us is responsible for deciding how to respond to our calling from God. To use the modern jargon we have to "own" it for ourselves, no-one else can do it for us. And if we are to follow God's call we must expect the most awesome and unexpected journey, but at times it will be a bitter struggle. No-one who wholeheartedly follows God has an easy ride: think of the prophets; think of Paul; think of Jesus himself.

If you read the rest of 1 Samuel chapter 3, you'll see that in the morning Samuel has to tell Eli what God said. And it's bad news. Samuel has to tell him the awful fate that will befall Eli and his family. As for Nathaniel, he follows Christ as one of his twelve disciples. He becomes a part of Jesus' amazing ministry. But it also took him to difficult and dangerous places and he is generally thought to have been martyred - crucified upside-down - in modern day Azerbaijan. Thankfully, following God's call doesn't always lead to such suffering. Samuel's call as a judge and prophet allowed him to live out his natural life. He was instrumental in protecting Israel from Philistine oppression, and anointed both Saul and David as Kings.

So responding to God's call will be both exhilarating and challenging. But it might be that, like Eli, mentoring others, helping them to hear God's call, perhaps that might be your greatest work for God.

So keep listening, keep watching. And be ready to act.

Kevin