

God's Calling
1 Samuel 3, 1-10

When Jenny and I visited our Son and daughter in law over Christmas they confirmed that our daughter in law, Laura was pregnant and that their child would be born in July. As you can imagine we are two very proud and happy prospective grandparents. Naturally the conversation went around all aspects of the baby, its birth and the time afterwards. When should we visit next, and of course what will the baby be called. Shall Malcolm and Laura choose a traditional family name or choose something they want, as long as it is not too bizarre. As you can imagine, we spent many hours in endless conversation. I am sure the name they choose will be fine.

The story we heard this morning also started with a child Samuel. He was not named after someone important in the family, rather his mother Hannah, named him Samuel because she had asked the Lord for him; Samuel means *heard from God*. Hannah named Samuel specifically because she believed that God had answered her prayer.

If we remember the story, Hannah could not have children and finally prayed to God for a child. God answered her prayer and she gave birth to Samuel, but Hannah had promised God that she would give him to the Lord for all the days of his life. So, after Samuel was weaned, Hannah presented him to Eli, the Chief Priest in the Temple and Samuel was brought up in the Temple.

We then meet up with Samuel in the Temple when he was still quite young and we read of God's calling to him. We heard that initially Samuel

thought it was Eli calling and Samuel's response was 'Here I am, you called me' then as Eli understood the situation, he instructed Samuel to change his response. When Samuel heard the call the fourth time his response was 'Speak, for your servant is listening'

When we look at this incident we realise that Samuel is a young man living in the Temple amongst the priests; they all have a relationship with god, but he doesn't yet have a relationship with God. When we first catch a glimpse of him he doesn't yet know God. But that doesn't appear to matter; God clearly knows him and calls his name.

In the New Testament reading we are given the story of Jesus calling Philip and Nathaniel. Within this story, Jesus comments that he had seen Nathaniel sitting under the Fig Tree, an indication that Jesus already knew Nathaniel before he called him.

God knew Samuel; Jesus knew Nathaniel, God knows us.

In this world it is often quite easy to assume that we are unknown. There are 7 billion, which is 7000 million people in the world. In Germany there are 82 million people. In Munich there are about 1.35 million people, so you could have 65 Munichs in Germany. It is quite easy to believe that we are totally insignificant when we hear such large numbers. If there are 7 billion people in the world I can hardly declare that I am known, let alone well known. If you do a modern check and try and Google yourself, it is interesting to see if you get any hits. I managed one. For me, it is better to assume that I am totally unknown and the few people that I know really doesn't make any difference.

Often when we hear the news we hear of stories which feature many people. Another 500 people were made redundant – 5000 children a day die from water borne disease – 10,000 people have been displaced in Nigeria over the last few weeks due to the violence in that country. Large numbers that seems to hide the personal factor of the stories. These stories do not have the same impact as they would have if we actually knew the names of the people. If some of these were our friends or family, they would have a much greater effect on us. As they are reported, they are just a number.

We all know that names make people real. When I was at school, teachers were called 'Sir' or 'Miss', and colleagues at work often called each other by their surnames; a certain distance in relationships on a respectful, slightly less than personal, level. Today, first names are often used very casually.

Our personal identity is important to us, and our names are a key part of that. It defines us; what we look like, how we see things what our beliefs are, what our principles are. How we relate to others, what our attitude to the poor is, and what our attitude to the oppressed is. It all adds up to who we are as an individual, it creates the person. It is also significant that identity theft seems to be increasing. The fact that someone else can steal your identity, to allow them to remove money from your account. To allow them to apply for credit cards and such like in your name. Identity is important to us.

It is interesting that when we were discussing names for the baby with Malcolm and Laura everyone agreed that there were certain names to be avoided. One example was names of particularly bad pupils of Jenny or

Malcolm. Names of people we did not trust. Often we associate the name with the character.

Our name of course, giving us value, allows us to hear our call to mission. In the hymn that we shall sing later, 'I, the Lord of sea and sky' Samuel's response, 'Here I am Lord' is followed by a question, 'Is it I, Lord' That stage comes from most of us long before we can confidently response to God's call ' It is I '. Which is Samuel's response later in the story.

It is interesting when we listened to the bible story we hear Samuel initially giving the response to Eli of ' Here I am, you called me' When he understood the situation, Eli changed the response to ' Speak, for your servant is listening'. When I read this, it struck me that there was a key difference to the response that is as important to us, as it was to Samuel.

If we respond to God, 'Here I am' it is a very uncommitted answer. Here I am. It doesn't give away any potential understanding, expectation or commitment. By changing the response to 'Speak, for your Servant is listening' we place ourselves in a totally different situation. We are no longer neutral just being here. We are demonstrating that we have made a judgement and given a response. We are inviting God into our lives – God speaking, and we are open to his direction – us listening.

Just like Samuel, identifying our vocation is frequently a long drawn out process, and a decision often comes only after testing. We have to be open to the prayerful counsel of those in whom we trust, and God's call may not lead where we expect. We learn a lot about ourselves on the way. Sometimes the calling demands hard things of us. The message Samuel had for Eli was not easy to give or to receive. Sometimes hearing

hard things can move us out of our comfort zone, and be exactly what we need.

At times we find ourselves called into situations we least anticipate and need to make an effort to develop ourselves to work in that in that place. I know I have mentioned before, living in Munich and speaking to you all here in this place came as a great surprise to me, and an even greater challenge to Jenny. But we believe this is where God wants us at present.

At times we need to respond in the same way that Nathaniel responded to the call of Jesus. Philip told Nathaniel to 'Come and See', Nathaniel responded. He came to see Jesus.

Nathaniel responded to the call by coming to see what Jesus was all about. It seems that Nathaniel was an academic and had an enquiring mind. His response to Jesus call would be based on observation and logic, not on emotion.

Nathaniel went and saw. He talked with Jesus and looked with amazement, stunned at what Jesus knew about him. Nathaniel found his ultra-critical attitude changing in a great moment of truth. No longer did he think of Jesus as someone who came simply from that dreadful place called Nazareth. – If you remember, it was Nathaniel who questioned that 'Could anything good come out of Nazareth?' "Rabbi, Teacher," he said to Jesus, "you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel." That was the precise moment when Nathaniel discovered the truth about the man who called him by name.

Samuel did not know God, but God knew Samuel and he knew what his limitations were, but still called him. Jesus knew the disciples before he called them. He knew their weaknesses and their issues, but he still called them. He knew they were not perfect, they all had their problems, but he knew that they had potential and their frailty was only a reflection of their humanity. It made them real people that others could relate with.

Last week, Pastor Christine asked us what we would do if we were one of the wives of the wise men who were called to follow the star? How would we respond to this change in our life? How would we respond to God's call in our current situation?

When we receive God's call it is a personal call, a call made by God to a specific person and it demands a response. The response is not always easy.

We are already living in our own place. We already have commitments and responsibilities. We live within a network of friendships and relationships. When we get the call, we have to work out how we respond. Sometimes we can respond within our situation, we live with people who understand, perhaps with people who have already made their own response. Some live where there is little understanding or support. They may live where others have rejected Jesus and choose to live by other rules. This is much harder and responding to Jesus' call can become a great challenge.

Wherever, we must do what Samuel did and answer that God should speak, as we are ready to listen. We must also do what Nathaniel did. We must come and see what Jesus is; what he offers and how he can support

us. Jesus knows us before he calls us. He knows us, not only by name, but also by nature, capability and potential. He knows the situations we are in and the pressures we all live with.

When God called the wise men to follow the star, he knew their situation, capabilities and knowledge and worked within it. They were men of science who looked for signs, he gave them a sign that they could follow.

God knew Samuel even although Samuel did not know God. God knew Samuel's potential and called him to carry out a great task for the Jewish nation. He made Samuel a great priest and a King Maker.

Jesus recognised the potential that Nathaniel had. He had recognised Nathaniel as a man who thought things through; he had seen him sitting under the Olive Tree deep in thought and knew that here was a thinker a man who would become a key member of the team of disciples.

Jesus knows us by name when he calls us. He knows our abilities, our situation and our limitations, but when he calls, he expects a response.

'Speak Lord, for your servant is listening'

Come, Spirit of God,
take my hand, and lead me where I need to go.
Be my guide in the darkness,
my companion when I face despair;
urge me to farthest limits
until at last I ascend to heaven

to be held in your loving arms.

Amen.