

**God with us sermon**  
**God with us, with each other; Jesus fully divine and fully human**

We have heard two very familiar readings from the Old and New testaments this morning. Many of you will have read these many times. I myself remember the calling of Samuel very well from the illustrated version of the Bible that I was given as a small child. What can I possibly say that has not been said before? Well the short answer to that is probably: nothing. And to actively try to do so might well be disconcerting for us all. So my aim this morning is to try to refresh these readings to be of benefit and to encourage us all for these testing times in which we find ourselves. My thoughts can be summarised as this: that we are all called to serve God; we are called in different ways to different things and, I think these passages show us, that we are urged to support one another in that calling. I believe that these are helpful passages at this time. Many of us are spending a lot of time alone or with only the immediate members of our households, and there is a tendency to feel that our lives are turning in on themselves and our worlds are small and constricted. This is not healthy, and so I pray that our interaction with scripture today might encourage us to turn our gaze outwards again at the world around us so that, spiritually at least, our horizons are broadened.

The first aspect about these passages that I would like to draw to your attention, is that they have some similarities. For a start, they have a supernatural element. That is, there is an awareness demonstrated that God calls people directly. This is very obvious in the reading from Samuel. Three times, the voice of God calls the boy's name. In the Gospel, Jesus calls Philip to follow him, but in Nathanael's case, we are only aware of God's intervention once he and Jesus have met. This cynic has his presumptions blown apart when Jesus tells him that he knew him even before Philip intervened to encourage him to get up from under the tree and come over.

That brings us to our second similarity. These are not just stories about divine intervention; they contain a strong message that human beings are the ones who enable God's action. Samuel has absolutely no idea that the voice he hears may not be human until instructed by his mentor, Eli. Nathanael would have probably never got over his prejudice if he had not been urged by his friend. I will come back later to what we might take from this.

For this has led me on to think less about Nathanael and Samuel, and think more about the two people who facilitate that encounter with the divine. I hope that this will set off your own thoughts about your own experiences of discipleship and evangelism. Let's look at the Gospel reading first and then go back to the Old Testament passage and reconsider how different Philip and Eli appear to be, given the greater detail we have about them in other chapters in the Bible.

The passage from John comes from very near to the beginning of the book, and so we must be aware that John has prioritised this episode, preceding it only with his prologue about the Word being made flesh and John the Baptist being a witness to

the light of the world, signposting the coming of Jesus, whom he recognised when he baptised him and saw the Holy Spirit descending on him. This then, for John, is a vital response to that initial information. Throughout the rest of his book, he continually explores people who remain “in the dark” versus those who “see the light”, the different people who remain spiritually blind in contrast to those who understand who Jesus is, and the responses of those who follow the truth and those who turn away. The other three Gospels do not fill out the character of Philip at all, and we almost miss here that fact that Jesus calls him directly and his immediate reaction is to introduce somebody else too.

Philip definitely seems to be a practical, “people person”. In John 6 it is he that questions how the 5000 people are going to be fed. Then later, in chapter 12 of John, he is the apostle that a group of Greeks approach when they want to be introduced to Jesus. Surely they do not pick him just because he has a Greek-sounding name; he must have appeared to be approachable. There is disagreement as to whether the Philip of Acts 6 is the same Philip, as some commentators point out that the disciples appointed seven people to ensure that all in the Christian community are treated fairly and to “wait on tables” because they wanted to concentrate on ministering the word of God. It is often that passage referred to, when the discussion of whether the role of Deacon is recognised biblically. As our Philip was a disciple, then he should not have deigned to become a deacon. I wonder. You will probably not be surprised that I am willing to think that he might have decided that this caring, interactive, relational role was one that suited him better. We will never know, as those described as disciples and apostles are not referred to again as being specifically the original 11 plus Matthias. He may then also be the man who waited “in the spirit” and so was able to intercept the Eunuch mentioned in Acts 8. Whether these incidents do relate to the same Philip or not, we can tell from the excerpts that are not ambiguous that Philip was a ready believer and a friendly, practical and thoughtful man.

Eli, however, is a far more complex servant of God. If we just concentrate on the episode we have just heard, as my children’s bible did, he seems a wise mentor, if a little sleepy and slow to hear that Samuel is hearing the word of God. If, however, we read the preceding two chapters, we realise that he does not always exercise wisdom. In the first chapter, he sees Hannah (Samuel’s future mother) at a distance, in such great distress at being childless that her mouth is moving in prayer, and makes a snap judgement that she must be drunk, and goes and tells her off! Then in chapter 2, as Samuel grows up in the temple, his story is interrupted by the information that Hophni and Phinehas, Eli’s sons, were wicked, abusing their priestly privileges, taking meat intended for the offerings and sleeping with the servant girls. Eli, though fully aware of their antics, did not discipline or even remonstrate with them. So by the time Samuel hears God’s voice, God has announced through a man of God that Eli’s priestly line will be discontinued and his offspring will die young. Eli’s enthusiasm for God failed to overcome the connection he had with his wayward sons.

Why refer to these other readings? Firstly, because, for me, this shows that it does not matter who you are, or what sort of person you are, God can use you in God's mission. It seems to me that a lot of us are shy to talk about matters of faith, not because we are scared of recrimination from those to whom we are talking but because, deep down, we are afraid that we are not a good enough example; that we are inadequate, and that will somehow taint or dilute this wonderful good news that we know, that God loves the world so much that he gave us Jesus. If that is indeed resonating with you, then take heart from these readings. Trust God's leading and speak out in love without reserve.

The other reason for this background reading is to highlight the fact that, in the moment, both Eli and Philip responded without really knowing what effect their words would have and what would become of it all. Philip just veered aside and picked up a friend. This friend then met Jesus, declared him to be the Son of God, and King of Israel (addressing Jesus as Rabbi - this is often the device used by John to indicate that the person in question is not quite on the right lines with his understanding of the Messiah) and then disappeared from the story never to be mentioned again. In contrast, Eli, awoken several times over the course of one night, ended up sign-posting towards God a child who emerged to become one of the most influential prophets of Israel. So again, I encourage you to share your faith; you cannot know what that person will be called to, you may not even understand what they go on to feel called to do, and in all likelihood you may lose touch and never find out whether it led to anything else at all. Because we, as church, are required to plan initiatives, allocate money, and come up with mission statements and the like, we sometimes forget that it is God's mission into which we are invited. When Philip talked to Nathanael, Jesus already knew his heart. When Eli advised Samuel, he was just explaining a voice the boy had already heard but not understood. Often, in conversations about faith, it becomes clear that God is already working in somebody's life, even if they have not recognised that fact.

So as we continue in lockdown, I urge you to continue to look after one another and encourage one another in your callings and to go on using technology, be it sophisticated Zoom or the everyday telephone, to reach out to people searching for stability and reassurance in this time of chaos and uncertainty. We are all so hungry for connection and relationship that conversations about faith and future hope happen on a regular basis. And through it all, we know that God is ever-faithful, all-knowing, and always with us. That is a valuable message worth passing on.

God bless you.

- Deacon Kathy Johnson