

Did you call me?

We're in the season of Epiphany when the focus in our Sunday bible readings is around God's presence, his glory, even, being revealed to different people. Last week it was to the 3 wise men. (They are just about visible in front of the stable in this Swedish crib scene). This week we hear of the experience of the boy Samuel and then Nathaniel.

An experiment

I want to start with an experiment! I'd like each of us to pinpoint someone on the opposite side of the church, ie not near you (*pause while we do that*) and then, on the count of three, call out their name. Don't shout. Just say it clearly. 1,2,3. Ok Can you put your hand up if you heard your name being called? I wonder what it was like for you?

After watching a Planet Earth programme, when I was marvelling with one of our grandchildren about the way chicks seem able to pick out their parents cry across a crowded bird colony she was not at all surprised, saying that she could easily hear her mum calling her across a busy shop.

On the whole we notice if our name is called, though there can be challenges; so, if you're called Richard in this church there will probably be several people who look up when that name is called!

The Sermon

Samuel heard his name in the middle of the night. His name means 'God hears', a name given by his mother Hannah because God heard her prayer when she asked God for a child (she had, up till that point, been unable to conceive). But there is a play on words here because the name Samuel can also mean 'hears God', which of course is exactly what we see the child Samuel doing in our first reading. This marks the start of a long life in which he continues to hear God's voice and in doing so, offers wise leadership to his people.

Hearing God call your name must be a powerful thing. It's not something I've experienced myself, but I imagine some of you may have done

In our gospel reading Nathaniel doesn't hear his name called. Jesus speaks to him, but not by name. However, this encounter does tell us something else about names. Immediately before talking with Nathaniel Jesus has called Simon to follow him and he tells him that from now on he will address him as Peter (Petros in Greek), meaning rock. Jesus is recognising an inner quality in Simon Peter and over time we gradually see Peter living out that rock like character. Jesus has revealed his hidden name

So there's the name given to us at birth and there there's a name, or we might say a character trait, that we don't necessarily recognise, but which is known to God and which he calls out of us. Sometimes, as in Samuel's case, the birth name speaks of that character trait, but often there may be no connection at all.

So let's notice that hidden name of Nathaniel; he is, Jesus says, an Israelite in whom there is no guile. He's not a deceiver like his great ancestor Jacob. We hear little about Nathaniel after this, but we can assume that like Peter, he lived out of that hidden name which for him, I guess, would have been expressed in a straightforwardness, and a truthfulness in his dealings with others.

Samuel was called to a particular task. He lived in turbulent times. His country was subject to attacks from neighbouring tribes, especially the Philistines, whilst the priests at the main sanctuary at Shiloh had become corrupt, unable to offer moral leadership. A different

governance was needed and it was during Samuel's time and under his guidance that Israel anointed their first king.

Nathaniel's call was simply to follow Jesus – the call all of us have as Christians. That call can take many different forms, but it will always have about it something that we can recognise as Christ like and it will involve living more and more from that hidden name known only to God and perhaps becoming more apparent to others.

Samuel and Nathaniel were called and we too can be called, but there are things that can get in the way. So now I want to highlight some of the obstacles we may face in hearing God's call. Let's look at Samuel first of all. I said he lived in troubled times. Our narrative also refers to it being a time when God wasn't really known. (1 Sam.3.1) 'the word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.' So Samuel didn't know that it was God who was calling his name, even though he had been living in the temple at Shiloh from age about 3! Fortunately Eli was still spiritually alert enough to recognise what was happening and advise Samuel accordingly. It's a reminder that even though we are part of a church and perhaps worship here regularly we may not recognise something God is trying to say to us. That's where church can be helpful. There may be someone here we trust who can spot a nudge we are getting from God.

However, given the degree of spiritual maturity there is among so many of the members here I want to challenge us to note that, like Samuel we live in troubled times *and* more importantly, times when it's hard for people to recognise when God might be talking to them because they have never been exposed to that great narrative of salvation, the gospel, that many here have known since childhood. Many have never been to church or heard stories from the bible as children. How can they know what God's voice sounds like or if what they *might* be hearing comes from a good or a bad place? Many of us, like me, who have been Christians for years can become complacent in our discipleship, forgetting the big shift that was needed to get us recognising Jesus in the first place, the delight in being known and loved, the challenges and adventures of following him. We can lose that spark that got Philip in our gospel reading getting hold of Nathaniel and saying, in effect, you've got to come and meet this rabbi Jesus. He's something else!' And because we can assume in church that everyone already knows about Jesus, our teaching, our preaching, our groups will reflect that. We can be built up, supported, nourished in our faith, but will it spill over into an alertness to those for whom this is foreign territory, some of whom might come to our church or to activities here, but most of whom we'll mainly meet in the course of our daily lives.?

That's when we may hit an obstacle apparent in the encounter with Nathaniel – prejudice! 'Can anything good come from Nazareth?' he asks when hearing of Jesus' home town. Notice that Jesus ignores that. Instead he homes in on what he sees as positive in Nathaniel and names it (there's no deceit in you) and even offers a picture of what could lie ahead for this man – this breaking in of heaven into his ordinary life – 'You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending etc'. There's so much desire in our society for this kind of tapping into a bigger dimension (witness our films, our novels, our therapies, our extreme sports) and yet here in our churches that's already happened for so many of us but we've stopped seeing how amazing it is and have grown used to keeping it to ourselves. Perhaps there's prejudice there on our part; people won't be interested. We'll be accused of brainwashing. Faith is a private, individual thing etc.

'I have called you by name, you are mine' God declares to his people through the prophet Isaiah when they are in exile. God still calls us and others by name, whether by our given name or that name known only initially to him. And, to quote our baptism service, 'he calls us out of darkness into his marvellous light', opening our eyes to see heaven breaking into our ordinary lives – an epiphany – and an invitation to share that with others.

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