

Sunday 14th January

1 Samuel 3:1-10

John 1:43-end

The story that we heard this morning of the boy Samuel hearing God speaking to him but not recognising that it was God takes me right back. Back to the early 1960s; back to a small Baptist Church on a housing estate on the borders of Kent and London. Back to the Sunday afternoon Sunday School to which my brother and I were taken each week so that my parents could have a couple of hours peace. Back to uncomfortable wooden chairs in a draughty hall. Back to being given small picture cards each week with illustrations of Bible stories. And the story of Samuel is one of the few stories that I remember hearing about while we were there – although I am sure there must have been many other Bible stories that we were told about. And I guess I remember it because it was about a young boy trying to make sense of a strange and complex world. And as such it resonated well with who I was.

And the story we heard in the gospel reading is another story that resonates with me. We hear of Philip who has heard the call of Jesus – Jesus saying to him “follow me”. And immediately he looks for his friend Nathanael and extends the call to him too. *‘We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.’* But Nathanael was not impressed - *‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’*. Nathanael’s preconceptions and prejudices came to the surface. Coming to a judgement before he knew all the facts. Writing people off before he had the opportunity to meet them. And often I find myself doing the same thing as Nathanael. And often I lose out because of it.

Two stories then about God calling people. God calling out to Samuel in the night with some words for the nation; God, in the person of Jesus, calling Nathanael to follow him. God speaking to both, but neither initially recognising the voice of God. Samuel because he had never God speak before; Nathanael because he couldn’t believe God would speak in that way.

Two stories then about God speaking to ordinary people. Maybe for you the idea of God – the God who created the whole Universe – speaking to you is a bit too far-fetched to take seriously. Surely God has better things to do than be concerned with me; surely I am not worthy of God’s attention; surely if God did speak to people it would be to the movers and shakers of the world – not to someone like me.

But the Bible is shot through with stories of God speaking to people; to ordinary people like you and me. Maybe not through the sound of a voice as it seems to have been for Samuel. Perhaps through a vision; maybe through circumstances; maybe in

the context of worship or through scripture; perhaps through the words of prophets or wise people. We see it in the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. We see it in the lives of the Judges culminating in Samuel himself; we see it in the times of the Kings – in the lives of David and Solomon for example. We see it in the prophets listening out for God's word so that they can proclaim it to leaders and people alike.

And in the New Testament we find God speaking to people right from the opening pages of the Gospels. In the Christmas story we encounter Zechariah, Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the wise men, Simeon and Anna and John the Baptist – all people God spoke to through angels, dreams or directly. And of course we find God speaking supremely through the person of Jesus to the crowds who followed him, and to the priests and lawyers who feared him; to friend and foe; to Jew and gentile alike. And even after Jesus' ascension God continues to speak to the early Christians. To church leaders and everyday Christians; through the Holy Spirit, scripture, vision, revelation and through other Christians.

And in the life of our churches through the ages and still today we hear people's testimonies of how God has spoken to them; how God has given them wisdom and direction; encouraged them and comforted them.

Be assured then, God does speak to people like you and me. Its one of the reasons we have our WOW moments here in church. To share those stories of our encounters with God; to share the words we have heard. Perhaps this is your testimony too. Perhaps you could share some stories of times when God has spoken to you or called you to something new.

So how then does God speak to us, and how can we be sure that we hear him?

Lets looks at those two Bible stories about Samuel and Nathanael again.

We read that *Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was*. It was night-time. He was lying down to sleep. He was not on the look-out for God. Nothing was further from his mind. I'm not sure he even realised that God spoke to people like that. But *Then the Lord called, 'Samuel! Samuel!'* . God came and found him. Where he was. Doing the things he normally did. God broke into the ordinariness of his life and spoke to Samuel. A life changing message which helped Samuel become the great prophets we know that he was.

And then Nathanael. Well, lets start a bit further back with Philip who first heard the call of Jesus. We read *The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.'* Jesus FOUND Philip. We don't know what Philip was doing – probably what he did most days. There is certainly no indication that he was

looking for Jesus but Jesus found him. And then the story continues *Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.'* Again no indication that Nathanael was on the look-out for anyone. God spoke through Philip and found Nathanael.

And then think about the Christmas stories we have heard over the last few weeks. Zechariah was in the Temple doing what he usually did when God spoke to him. Mary was visited by the angel in her home, going about her daily business. Joseph was asleep when God, through an angel, appeared to him and spoke to him. The shepherds were looking after sheep in the fields when God spoke to them through the song of the angels; the wise men – learned folk who studied the stars – were doing what they always did when God spoke to them through the appearance of a new star.

Can you see the theme here? God finds us where we are and speaks to us. We do not have to go looking for him as if he is hiding from us and doesn't really want to speak to us. We don't have to make the running in order for us to hear God speaking.

But – and of course there is a but – we have to be able to recognise the voice of God in whatever way he chooses to speak to us and be ready and willing to act on what we hear. As Zechariah was (eventually), as Mary was, as Joseph was, as the shepherds were and as the wise men were.

Which wasn't of course the case in today's two stories. Samuel did not initially recognise the voice as God's voice; Nathanael initially refused to believe that God would speak in that way.

The key to it all is to be expectant. When we read the Bible for example we should expect to hear God speaking through those words. When we come to church we should expect to encounter God in the hymns, in the prayers, in the bread and wine, in the conversations with others and even in the sermon. When we talk to a wise and respected Christian we should expect the words they say to contain wisdom from God. When we are enjoying God's creation we should expect to meet with the creator. When we are going about our ordinary daily business we should not be taken by surprise if God speaks to us either through the ordinary things of life or the extra-ordinary.

Perhaps we all have preconceived ideas about how and where and when God might speak to us. Perhaps we only expect God to speak in certain places, at certain times

and in certain ways and are not open to hear him apart from that. Perhaps our own ideas of God get in the way of what he wants to say to us.

The lesson we can draw from Samuel and Nathanael and countless others is that God wants to break into our lives and make his voice heard. He will do so most likely where we are. Our task is to be alert to the possibility and respond accordingly.

One of the ancient Collect prayers of the church includes the phrase *Almighty and everlasting God, you are always more ready to hear than we are to pray*

Maybe we could re-write that as *Almighty and everlasting God, you are always more ready to speak than we are to listen*