

**1 Samuel 3: 1-10 & John 1: 43-51 – *Calling***  
**Sunday 14 January 2024**

The God of the Bible has always been calling people by name. From Abraham to the sons of Zebedee, from Zechariah to Annanias, and (to choose those alphabetically in the middle) from Moses to Matthew: God has been interrupting people in the middle of their busy lives (or in moments of great crisis, or times of sudden joy, or when they are quietly alone, looking after their sheep) and says, 'Come along: I've got a job for you!' Many object: 'Who am I, that you should call me? I'm too old, or too young. I don't know how to do it. Send someone else!' And God replies, 'Do not be afraid. I will be with you.'

God's is call to each and every person: first of all, God calls us into life – to re-orientate our lives around the truth that is his life; to re-route our souls around his life-giving death and resurrection; to reboot our chaotic lives by the power of his peace-infusing Spirit. The Gospels begin with John the Baptist's calling people to repent because the Holy One was on his way. Answering the call to follow Jesus involves repentance, radical re-ordering of priorities and values and life-styles. It means being ready to abide in him, to be anchored to him, to be plugged into his unique power source, and to be drawn to his life-giving light. In the context of this general call to life, each individual has specific calls to specific work – major or minor, long term or short term, life-long or just for a moment – all of which can be called our callings.

Of the many stories of 'calling' in the Bible, the call of Samuel must be one of my favourites. What's not to like about the young boy full of youthful eagerness bouncing up from bed three times in a night saying, 'Yes, I heard you. What can I do?'

Samuel's full of new life and hope in an age of anarchy. This is the last flickering of the period of the Judges, when the different tribes of Israel each had their own leader, each desperately warding off their own enemies. We're told, 'The word of God was rare in those days, and there were not many visions.' What's more, the eyes of Eli the priest (who, you'd hope, would have such visions) had grown dim and he could hardly see. Nevertheless, 'the lamp of God had not yet gone out.' At the shrine at Shiloh, it is the job of the boy Samuel to tend the sacred flame. Much more than that, it is in his very self that hope for the future lies, if only he responds to God's call.

Well, he certainly does respond, with vigour and enthusiasm, three times in the night disturbing Eli's beauty sleep. But Samuel doesn't know it is God's voice. He needs the older and supposedly wiser head to recognise what's happening and what to do about it. But old grey-hair turns over and goes back to sleep.

I have a lot of sympathy for Eli – and not just because of getting his sleep so badly disturbed! He may be slow on the uptake, but he does get there in the end! He does realise that it is God speaking to Samuel, and he does trust the boy with the message. Discerning God's voice is hard, whether you think you're practised at it or not.

Experience tells you to be extremely wary of ascribing as God-given any random thought in your own head (or brought to you by others). Experience puts you on high alert when someone bounds up and declares, God has told me to say this or do that. The human heart is deceptive.

We do have in this story the basis of a proper discernment process. First, it's probably a good sign that it begins with misunderstanding – Samuel didn't think this was from God but simply Eli calling. There's no self-delusion here. Then, there is the sharing of the call. Samuel doesn't bottle it up, but asks Eli to help him understand. Then, they sleep on it: rarely a bad thing. And then there's the persistence. It happens three times: surely a sign that this is from God.

Many vocational journeys begin with a niggling feeling inside that simply won't go away, no matter how much we sleep on it. It continues with a readiness to act upon. In the morning Eli insists Samuel tell him everything, even though, as he guesses, it's a message of judgment on Eli himself. The tragedy of Eli is that he doesn't repent of his failings, but accepts God's judgment as his fate. He had the opportunity to be blessed by the ministry of the young boy Samuel, and enter the new phase of God's purposes, but he preferred to roll over and go back to sleep.

God's call is open to be heard by all of us, at all stages of life. Generally, it's not dramatic. Generally, it's quite small but nevertheless significant. Can you help with this? Can you speak to that person? Would you have a go at this? Not every request is from God, of course, and not every one is something we should agonise over. But every one deserves at least a quick prayer, because it might be from God. Some of us have a problem saying no, and our lives can become too fraught as we try to please everyone. Bear in mind you may be stopping someone else fulfilling their calling. Some of us have a problem saying yes, and miss out on what God wants for us, because we're fearful, or underplay our abilities, or simply feel too tired. The right question is whether God is calling. If he is, then what else do I need to change in order to say yes?

At the start of a new year, it's especially important for each of us to listen afresh to the call that comes in the night (or in the day time!) God calls to all – calls out with his love, shines his light, offers his life. And God calls with something specific, saying I've got this task, and it's just right for you (whether you think so or not). Will you trust me enough to take it onboard? Will you come and follow me, if I but call your name?