

SERMON FOR EPIPHANY 2 | 27.01.2021

I Samuel 3: 1-10; Romans 8: 28-32, 38-39

One of the many losses brought about by this pandemic is not being able to meet up with people, where and when we want. This week the rule on social distancing have been tightened yet further - not just in the insistence about wearing masks in the supermarket but in much tougher rules about who you can meet and where - whether on a bicycle or just on foot.

Yet the Christian message is rooted, especially at this time of the year, in God's plans to find ways to meet with us in ways that will make a difference. If Christmas is about the incarnation, the child come down from heaven, then Epiphany asks us to think what happens when Jesus joins with the others at the River Jordan for baptism and when Jesus turns water into wine at Cana - and also when, in today's Gospel the apostles Andrew and Peter, and then Philip and Nathaniel, are at that tipping point, when they are on the brink of discovering that Jesus isn't just a great teacher and preacher but the one, true, Son of Man.

Which takes us into some interesting places and to this question: how did it happen to each of us that we discovered that Jesus was more than just 'a name' trotted out by Church people? When did he did he call us?

We know that everything works for good for those who are called according to his purpose. What does that mean, in ordinary English?!

Surely what St Paul is saying is that God is calling his people - all the time! And Paul should know.

Six times in the Book of Acts he tells the same story, of how he was going to Damascus to arrest yet more Christians when he is thrown off his horse onto the road, completely disorientated and unable to see anything. And what happens next? He hears the voice of Jesus - who he had never met by the way, so we don't quite know how he knew it was Jesus - and Jesus is asking him a straight question: *why are you persecuting me?*

Which must have been the last thing Paul was expecting to hear, a senior government official with a mandate to arrest as many Christians as he could find!

In our Gospel today we have something equally weird, the scholarly Nathaniel being spoken to by Jesus - as if they knew one another ...

Being spoken to by God: wow! But isn't that a bit presumptuous? Isn't that just for the likes of Samuel and St Paul or one of the apostles? Surely that isn't something that happens to ordinary people like us; or even to saints if we are to believe Mother Teresa of Calcutta who wrote in her daily diary of how her heart ached throughout her life because she felt she never heard the voice of God?

In fact aren't these stories of ordinary mortals being spoken to by God in the Bible a bit dangerous? Mightn't they lead us to have expectations that we too should hear the voice of God at various times in our lives, especially when the going has got particularly difficult? Because, let's face it, it would be so much easier if we could rely on getting a special word from the Lord when life has got too much for us and we have completely run out of steam. How good it would be if we could guarantee that he was on our side. Didn't Jesus say to Nathaniel: *don't be too impressed that I knew you: you will see far greater sights than this - heaven will be opened for you and you will see me with the angels and saints!*

And more than a bit of us might well say, but what about me too? Can't I have an experience like that?

I remember being on holiday in France - something that feels now like an eternity ago. There we were sitting in an outdoor bar, having a drink and watching the world go by. And as I looked my attention was caught by a woman shouting (in French!) She started by being quite loud, but each time she called it was obvious that whoever it was she was trying to connect with was taking absolutely no notice (We didn't know who it was of course). Pretty quickly her voice got louder and louder and louder! And then she started to wave and when they didn't work she banged on the car that she was standing next to; fortunately there was no one in it!

She was clearly beginning to get mad and red in the face and then - perhaps there was a lull in the traffic or something - we could see a man turning towards her, presumably because he heard his name being called. And as he did so he gave her the broadest of smiles and walked to where she was standing. I hope she had calmed down by then because it was clear that he didn't realise how much effort she had put in trying to get his attention!

We all know that there is nothing more frustrating than trying to get people to listen to us - whether it is because of distance as in this case, or just because they don't want to hear!

I have to admit that I have been hooked into an Australian fly-on-the-wall programme called *Married at First Sight*. The premise is that total strangers are chosen by so called experts, and then go through a wedding ceremony having never met the person in front of them. They go on exotic honeymoons and have joint meals with other contestants before they take part in 'split or stay' sessions - and all in front of the cameras. I hate to admit it but I find it absolutely riveting!

But you can't sit through this kind of 'reality television' without seeing, in all its rawness, the ways that people just don't listen - or only listen to the things they want to hear; how they misinterpret and purposefully twist what has been said to them because they are too wrapped up in themselves.

The story of young Samuel always gets to me because it brings up my own experience of being sent away to boarding school and feeling very home-sick. The Temple for this very young boy must have seemed overwhelmingly strange, a young student under the control of the very old priest, Eli and, no doubt, at the mercy of Eli's three sons whom we know to have been nasty pieces of work. Of course Samuel's life skills were pretty limited so when he hears a voice in the middle of the night, how was he to know that it wasn't old Eli calling out for him because he wanted something?

Isn't it true that for any new Christian, if not indeed for many of us, we are simply not tuned in to hearing the voice of God? Like Samuel we just aren't expecting God to talk to us.

And so one of the first things we need to do in the Christian life is to find ways of being ready to hear what God has to say to us.

And that is no small task because we know from other people that God can and does talk to us in a million and one different ways. It might be direct words as it was for Samuel. It might as easily be through chance meetings or a strange coincidence as in the meeting of Jesus with Nathaniel. Hearing what God wants to share can come through something we read - not just the Bible but from almost anything that we come across. It might be something said to us by a friend, a family member or indeed a perfect stranger.

So how do we know that what we are hearing is from God and not what is just 'out there'? And one answer to that is 'Time'.

A few of you may still remember the winter of 1963. It was one of the coldest winters on record and my mother had broken her leg slipping on the ice. In those days that meant a huge, heavy plaster on her leg and very limited mobility. And in the middle of all that she needed to take me down from Cambridge to London, on the train, to have a voice trial for a Choir School.

And it was there that I had my Samuel experience: in that place, as I wandered around the Church on my own waiting for my turn to sing, I heard what I believe to be God calling me to be a priest. I had just turned nine - later to be a very home-sick nine year old!

But how did I know it was God speaking to me rather than just some random thoughts passing through my head? Time. I gave the messages time, either to drift away or to stick with me. And whatever I did, whatever happened to me, through a bit of success and rather more failure, that first 'call' never left me. Over the following twenty years even I could see how often all the doors in one direction opened up and all the doors in another directions stayed shut. Not only did I need to hear the original words but I also needed to test them - over and over again - to see how they fitted into a pattern that made sense.

I cannot tell you how necessary that experience has been over my lifetime. It was far and away my most tangible experience of God speaking to me, but by no means the only one. And it has been Time that has been my key to working out which ideas were mine and which ones were of God. Waiting, trying other options, listening for more reassurance, watching out for events to slot into place, seeing how other people have reacted when I have shared these thoughts with them.

Abraham, Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah - Samuel and of course Jesus: we celebrate each of these people because they were open to hearing God's voice and were prepared to give Time to testing what they heard.

Being open to God showing us, telling us, what he has in mind, is probably the most important thing we can do with our lives. How sad it would be if, at the end, we realised that God had been shouting out to get our attention, and we realised we simply hadn't been bothered to give him the time to listen...