

How do we talk about God in our modern world?

We talk about seeking God, believing in God, or doubting the existence of God. We talk about praying to God, asking God, worshipping God.

It's noticeable that in all these sentences, God is the object. God is the thing we believe in or don't. God is something we choose to engage with or not. And that reflects how, in the modern secular world, humans have come to define everything on their own terms, leaving God as an optional extra that you can take or leave. Isaac Newton developed his vision of a mechanical universe that operated independently of God, though Newton continued to believe that God revealed himself in the universe. But when Napoleon came to ask the physicist Pierre LaPlace why his work made no reference to God, he replied, "Sire, I have no need of that hypothesis."

So it's very striking that in all three of our readings this morning. God is not the object of the sentences. God is the subject. God is the one acting, and humans are responding. And essentially, in all three passages, God addresses, God calls, God interrupts human reality to transform it. Let's look briefly at each passage.

The calling of Samuel is one of my favourite passages in the Bible. The boy is woken three times by a voice he believes to be the elderly priest Eli. But it is God, intervening in the life of this chosen boy, and intervening in the life of the people of Israel whom he will lead. One thing I like about the story is that it shows how God speaks to children, and in the gospels Jesus speaks a lot about the need to be childlike in our ability to receive the Kingdom of God. Maybe the problem is that adults get too convinced of the idea that they are always in charge, that they are always the subject and never the object. But it's also the

case that the young Samuel needs the wisdom of the older generation to recognise the voice that is calling him. It's a beautiful reminder that the church is a multigenerational community where we need to listen to one another as we discern how God is speaking to us.

The passage from Revelation is a different kind of interruption. It is a strange and magnificent vision that God revealed to John of Patmos. It might seem so otherworldly as to be irrelevant to our own experience. And yet the lamb at the centre of the vision is Jesus Christ who was sacrificed for our sins and this vision is a glimpse of the cosmic reality that the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus has created – the redemption of all to be a kingdom and priests serving our God. In contrast to our secular modern world, it is a stark reminder that God is the ultimate subject, the one who is in charge of reality, even though most people – even most Christians – have become blind to that.

Then finally we have this passage from John's Gospel. Jesus begins this passage with an interruption: "follow me". No chit-chat. No long attempt to persuade. Before he does anything else, Jesus calls. And then three interesting things happen. First, Philip passes the call on to others: "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote... Come and see." Second, Nathaniel questions the authenticity of the call because it seems to come from an unlikely place: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" And finally, Jesus promises a glimpse of the kind of reality we find in the book of revelation: "You will see heaven opened, and angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man." The call is to something beyond human reality.

So what are we to take from these three Bible passages? If we are going to deepen our faith we have to go against the trend to think of God merely as another object in a human world. We have to allow God to address us. So what

kind of call should we be looking for? How does God interrupt our lives? I think maybe there are three takeaways.

First, we should note that **God addresses us from unlikely places and through unlikely people**. Here we have a child whom God addresses at a time when we are told that revelation from God was rare. We might have expected that revelation to come to Eli, but at least Eli is wise enough to recognise it in the boy Samuel. Would we have the wisdom to recognise when God is addressing us through unlikely people? And would we recognise if God was addressing us from unlikely places, like Nazareth which was clearly not considered a very prestigious or holy town?

Second, we should learn from Philip that **we can be the vehicle for God's call**. Sharing God's purposes with other people might feel difficult and embarrassing in this secular world where God has been written out of the picture. But it may be as simple as inviting someone to come with you to church, or saying what your faith means to you when a friend is in a difficult situation. God addresses us through other people so we must acknowledge that God addresses others through us.

Finally, both the book of Revelation and the words of Jesus at the end of the Gospel remind us that his call always **points to something far beyond ourselves**. The Gospel isn't some humanistic message of self-fulfilment and the church isn't just a group of people who support one another and do good things in the community. God is the ultimate reality who transforms our reality. What God calls us to is greater spiritual depth and closeness to him. Out of that, all our righteous living will flow.

So today we reflect on how God calls, God interrupts. We need to recognise how much secular modern life closes our eyes and ears to those interruptions. We need to recover a spiritual attentiveness to hear God's call in unlikely places and from unlikely people, to be ourselves one who shares that call with others, and to see the mystical realities that lie beyond our daily human lives, that we may live according to the ways of God.