

## A Reflection from Revd Ali for the Second Sunday of Epiphany

Today's readings are all about listening to God. Listening and hearing. I don't know about you but sometimes I listen to things but I don't really hear. That can be because I am distracted by something else, like writing an email whilst watching the telly. It can be because we 'haven't got our ear in'. For example when we meet someone with a new, strong, regional accent. It takes us a little while to tune into the nuances of what they are saying and sometimes we listen but don't hear because we aren't expecting to hear anything, especially if our name is suddenly called unexpectedly – our response is doubtful, 'did I really hear that right?'

In our first reading we heard God calling to Samuel in the temple. In the earlier verses we hear that Samuel was a very special child. His parents Elkanah and Hannah hadn't been blessed with a child so Hannah, in her devotion to God, prays for the gift of a child. But she also promises that if God does grant her request, she would dedicate her child to God's service. Samuel, the much longed for child, is sent when he was old enough to serve in the temple at Jerusalem alongside the priest Eli. Unfortunately, the priesthood of Eli and his sons had become corrupt and as the writer puts it: 'In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions'. The priests and the people did not expect to hear from the Lord. It had been a long time since God had spoken. But Samuel's family is different. They were devoted to God, as Samuel's dedication to the temple showed. But it still takes three times for God to call Samuel before Samuel responds. Because of the rarity of words from God at that time, Samuel wasn't expecting to hear from God at all, let alone to hear God calling him by name. I wonder if that is our experience. Do we expect to hear from God? Do we expect to hear God call us by name?

Then, in our Gospel reading we hear how Philip and Nathaniel became followers of Jesus. John tells us that Jesus decided to go to Galilee and it is there that Jesus found Philip. That phrase is really interesting. If you read about people who have dedicated themselves to a spiritual life, very often they will have spent years seeking out the right person to follow. But for us, as Christians, that isn't the case. As John tells us Jesus found Philip, Philip didn't search for Jesus, Jesus found him. Humanity didn't search for God, God sought out relationship with his creation. At the very beginning of creation in Genesis 3 we hear that God walked in the garden and called to Adam and Eve 'where are you?'. This is a story that is repeated throughout the Bible. God seeking out relationship with his beloved children. St Paul reminds us of this truth in his letter to the Ephesians when he writes 'for he chose us in him before the creation of the world...'. What an incredibly humbling thought. That God who created heaven and earth, created all things known and unknown. God seeks a relationship with us, mere humans.

When Jesus finds Philip, he simply says to him 'follow me'. Jesus in that one phrase asks Philip and us to put him first in our lives. Philip is so moved by the encounter that he leaves everything behind him. His family, his possession, his plans - all are left behind. Philip realises the importance of being with Jesus. That is his greatest imperative. So, he follows Jesus.

The first thing Philip then does is to seek out Nathaniel. He wants to share the experience with him. Philip understood that this was the right thing for his life. He didn't know the details, he didn't know how his life was going to change. All that didn't matter and he wants Nathaniel to share in the experience. He is certain in his own mind what has happened. He tells Nathaniel that 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law wrote...' Philip was passionate about sharing the Good News, but Nathaniel's response is not very encouraging. 'Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?' But Philip's enthusiasm isn't diminished, he doesn't get into a debate about the geographical or spiritual merits of Nazareth, he ignores Nathaniel's cynicism and just encourages him to come and see.

You can almost imagine the scene. Philip drags Nathaniel over to Jesus and Jesus' response is interesting. Jesus said 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' Nathaniel wants to know how Jesus knows him so well. Jesus responds that he saw Nathaniel under the fig tree as

Philip spoke to him. Nathaniel at that point is impressed. Jesus knows something of the unseen physical encounter. But it is the spiritual encounter that Jesus is talking about. Jesus saw Nathaniel coming towards and knew what was in his heart. But he had also known him, as we are all known by God, since the beginning of time. Jesus found and called Nathaniel through the agency of Philip. Jesus knew that Nathaniel led an obedient Jewish life, but he then tells him that there is so much more for Nathaniel to experience through his relationship with Jesus. 'Very truly I tell you, you will see 'heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on' the Son of Man.'" He calls Nathaniel unto a deeper place of peace and blessing through that relationship.

Our readings for today are, on the surface, simple passages about the calling of Samuel, Philip and Nathaniel. But what can they tell us today about our relationship with God?

As Christians, we need to be alert to the voice of God but we first need to decide if we want to have a relationship with God. A relationship is not one-sided. According to the Collins English Dictionary 'the **relationship** between two things is the way in which they are connected.' By its very definition, a relationship between us and God is about connection. So, how do we attend to that connection? How do we make the time and space to be available to speak to God and for God to speak to us? Are we too busy or distracted to listen and then to really *hear* what God wants to tell us?

We can be confident that God wants a relationship with us. God chose us. God chose you and me before the very beginning of time and calls us into relationship with him through Jesus Christ our Saviour. Then like Philip, when we know the deep peace and blessing that a relationship with Jesus brings, we should be inspired to tell others. We should want to share the Good News about Jesus' life, death and resurrection and the impact that has had on our lives. Yes, there will be times when we are knocked back – Philip could have been discouraged by Nathaniel's response – but we still need to offer the gift that we are all offered, the gift that we have received, the gift of a relationship with the God of love.

We are all called into a life of peace and blessing with God through Jesus. Jesus sees us and knows exactly who we are. Jesus knows our strengths and our weaknesses. He knows our personalities and our deepest needs. He knows us completely and wants us to know him completely too. It is a life-long journey of discovery that we are being called to. A journey that is only complete when, as Paul tells us in his first letter to the Corinthians, 'For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.'

So how are we prepared to respond when we hear Jesus say 'follow me'? Will we, like Samuel, respond "Speak, for your servant is listening?"

Amen