

15 January 2012 – Epiphany 2

Readings: 1 Samuel 3:1-10; John 1:43-51

I read a story this week<sup>1</sup> about a little boy who used to listen to a radio programme (this was in the States and some decades ago) called *The Moody's Obituary Column of the Air*. It started with somber, funereal organ music, and then a deep, basso profundo voice would intone,  
*John Doe of 334 Mockingbird Lane passed away last evening at Northern Surrey Hospital. He is survived by . . . He was employed by . . . He was a member of . . . Funeral to be held at . . . Church, conducted by the Rev. . . Memorials may be sent to . . .*

Between 5 and 10 names each night, all read with great dignity by that deep, deep voice.

The little boy, who was 5 or 6 at the time, concluded that the voice on the radio was the voice of God. Who else would know all those things about a person, all those details? And because he belonged to a church that talked a lot about the Last Judgment and being prepared to meet God, he decided that the voice on the radio was God sending out a message:

“These are the ones I took last night. One day it will be your turn. Are you ready to meet your maker?”

And that was rather scary.

Then one day his father took him into town for a haircut. He was at the barber's waiting his turn, when the man in the barber's chair opened his mouth and said in that oh so familiar voice: “*Could you take a little more off around the ears?*”

It was the voice of God! Yes, GOD was there, right there in that Barber Shop.

“Oh no!” he thought. “My time has come! God has come to take me home. It's my time to face the Final Judgment.”

And he was absolutely certain of one thing; he was not ready to go. So he hid in the bathroom, cowering in the dark under the sink, until the man with the voice left. And never again in all his life did he hear God's voice audibly.

But he did hear God call him. He heard God call him to follow Jesus. He heard God call him to various places of ministry. Not an audible voice, not that voice on the radio, but very definitely a call from God. And the call came, more often than not, through the voices of other people.

Both our Scripture readings today describe the way in which people heard the voice, the call of God.

For young Samuel, it was an audible voice calling him in the night and waking him from sleep.

The voice called him by name - “Samuel! Samuel”

But Samuel didn't know what was happening – he didn't recognise the voice as God – he did not yet know the Lord.

His response was to go to old Eli, the one he expected to be calling him, saying “Here I am”.

No one was expecting to hear God's voice, actually. The word of the Lord was rare in those days, the story says. But if anyone would have been expected to hear and recognise God's voice, it was Eli. He was the priest, the one whose task it was to represent God to the people and the people to God. He was at the centre of official established religion, providing the proper authorised way to approach God, to hear God, to get right with God. Surely if God was going to speak, he would speak to Eli..

But Eli's eyesight had begun to grow dim, and he could no longer see. And his failing eyesight was matched by the darkness gathering in his own life. At the end of the previous chapter, Eli had been warned of the judgment that was coming on his family. His sons had no regard for God or for their duties as priests – they were abusing the position for their own gain and oppressing the people, And Eli could do nothing to stop them. Not only was his eyesight fading, but his authority was feeble and his purpose in life was failing.

Here we have Samuel, who heard God's voice calling him by name, but who didn't recognise it. And we have Eli lying in his blindness, in the darkness, not hearing the voice himself .

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1 Sermon by Delmer L. Chilton, in <http://lectionarylab.blogspot.com/2012/01/year-b-second-sunday-after-epiphany.html>

Yet Eli, for all his blindness, was still able to perceive that the voice that Samuel was hearing was the call of God. And Eli still knew how to respond to that voice. What gave him the clue? Perhaps it was the persistence of the voice, as once, twice, three times Samuel appeared at his bedside saying “Here I am – you called me.”

And even if his life and his family were under judgment, Eli was still able to act as a priest, as the one who mediated between the people and God. Eli knew what to do when you heard the voice of God. He knew how to mentor the young boy so that he could recognise and respond to the God he did not yet know. He told Samuel that when the voice spoke again, calling his name, he should reply – Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.

As the little boy in my story discovered in his own life, when it comes to hearing God's voice, most often that involves other people. Other people can help us to recognise what we don't yet know, other people can share with us what they know - how to respond, how to place ourselves in a place and attitude that will make us open to God's voice, so that we can hear what it is that God is telling us.

And of course, we also need to recognise that if others can be the means by which we hear the voice and call of God, then we also can be the ones who provide that help for others.

God wants to use us to mentor people who do not yet know how to respond to God,

God wants us to share what we have known of the ways of God, what we know about listening to God, with those who are coming after us.

God was calling Samuel to a lifetime of service, and the call was coming very directly, audibly – but still God worked through Eli's perception, Eli's experience and Eli's willingness to share what he knew with the boy, so that Samuel was able to learn to respond appropriately to God.

And Philip was doing the same sort of thing for Nathanael. We don't know for sure but there seems to be a hint that Philip had been introduced to Jesus by Andrew and Peter – certainly he came from the same town as them. And after he meets Jesus, he in turn goes to find Nathanael, to tell him about the person he'd found. Jesus will describe Nathanael as a true Israelite - and Philip begins with an introduction that speaks powerfully to one steeped in the Jewish faith - “We had found the one of whom Moses and the prophets wrote”. That has to be the Messiah! But then Philip goes on to say “Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth” From Nazareth? Nathanael is far from convinced. In fact, his response is worthy of a Tui billboard - “Yeah, right!”

I guess most of us know that scepticism. Among our friends, even in our own families. You believe in Jesus? You go to church? You think all that “religion stuff” is important? Yeah, right!

Philip doesn't argue with him, but neither does he back off – he simply says “Come and see.”

And when Nathanael comes to see Jesus, he discovers that Jesus already knows him.

Do you remember the story of Jacob, the trickster, the one who was full of deceit, of guile? Nathanael is not like him, Jesus says – he is a man in whom there is not deceit.

And do you remember the new name that Jacob receives after all his struggles with God (and with himself) – Israel? Nathanael is a true Israelite.

And do you remember the dream Jacob had, of angels ascending and descending on a ladder that reached from earth to heaven? “Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it” said Jacob – but Jesus tells Nathanael, “This is what you will experience yourself, heaven opened and angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man”.

Jesus, himself, has now become the bridge between heaven and earth, between God and humanity.

The place to meet God is not at the ladder of Jacob's dream at Bethel, but in Jesus himself.

Philip invited his friend to come and see what he himself had found.

Eli told Samuel how to place himself in a listening, responsive attitude towards God, ready to listen to the voice that called his name.

And a theologian of our own time, Douglas John Hall, has reflected in his autobiography<sup>2</sup> on the role that

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2 *Bound and Free: A Theologian's Journey*, by Douglas John Hall ; quoted by Bryan P Stoffregen in <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/john1x43.htm>

many ordinary people played in his life, by simply being who they were and doing what they did, yet through their ordinary lives giving him gifts of insight and support and affirmation.

He went on to say:

Every one of us plays the role of giver, wittingly or unwittingly, in relation to all whom we meet. And if we know this about ourselves, we may be inspired to pay a good deal more attention than otherwise to the way that we are with one another, the things we say to one another, the deeds we do and leave undone.

God may not often – may not ever – call us in an audible voice.

And yet God calls us, calls us by name.

God calls us to do for others what Eli did for Samuel and what Philip did for Nathanael.

By the way we are with one another, the things we say to one another, the deeds we do and leave undone, we can invite others to “come and see” what we have found.

We can show others how to recognise and respond to the call of God on their lives.

Who has been an Eli, a Philip in your life, telling you about Jesus, inviting you to “come and see” teaching you to listen to God's voice in whatever way it comes to you?

And how might God be wanting to use your life experience, your knowledge of God, to encourage and teach others in the ways of God?

Let us take a minute in silence to attend to God - speak, Lord, for your servants are listening.