

## THE VOICE OF THIS CALLING

In all three readings today there is a call from God. God calls the boy Samuel by name in the Temple (*1 Samuel 3.1–10*); in the Court of Heaven the Angel calls for one who is worthy to open the scroll with the seven seals (*Rev 5.1–10*); and Jesus calls Nathaniel to follow him (*John 1.43–51*). How do they respond to the call?

The young Samuel is confused; he thinks that it is the priest Eli who is calling him. Eli realises that it is the call of God, and tells Samuel how to respond.

In the Court of Heaven, no one responds to the call of the angel; no one is worthy except Christ himself.

When Nathaniel (who is called Bartholomew in the other Gospels) first hears about Jesus from Philip he responds derisively: 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' But when he meets Jesus, he sees the truth, and he confesses that he is the Son of God.

The call of God is addressed not just to the few, but to everyone. In heaven, when the Lamb receives the scroll, the elders sing a new song of praise that those whom Christ has redeemed are a kingdom and priests to serve God. That's all of us. We who believe are those who are redeemed, and God calls us to serve him. We are called to virtue... We are called to service, using our gifts and talents for the good of others and for the common good... We are called to be witnesses...

How do we respond? Are we like the boy Samuel, who heard the voice, but did not know from whom it came? Lots of people feel that they have to do something particular with their lives – follow a certain way, do a particular job – but not everyone understands this feeling as a calling from God. We need help to know that it is God who calls, like Eli helped Samuel. God calls us along the grain of our being. His call may challenge us, but it will never deny the person that he has made us to become.

Are we like Nathaniel, who did respond, but whose response was based on very shallow grounds – that Jesus saw him under fig tree? (If that reason for following Jesus seems odd to us, then we can be reassured because it seemed odd to Jesus too!) But Nathaniel is not unusual; people believe for all kinds of reasons: family tradition, national or cultural identity, they're nice people at the church... Whatever the reason, it's a starting point; any response gives God something to work on, but we have to let him work on it. Our initial response needs to mature and find deeper roots, as Jesus said in his reply to Nathaniel: 'You will see greater things than these.'

Or are we like the Court of Heaven, turning away from the call because we feel unworthy? No one feels worthy; as it says in Revelation, only Christ is worthy; but even so, through him God calls us, however we feel. I remember Bishop Roy Williamson saying that when he was called to be a bishop he was reluctant because he did not feel worthy. His spiritual guide said to him that no one feels worthy; if they do, then there is something lacking in them. Like Nathaniel under the tree, God sees the potential, not just the actual; he sees what we have it in us to become, not just what we are now. And those whom he calls he leads and empowers. As St Paul said, 'The One who calls you is faithful.' (*1 Thess 5.24*)

To recognise God's call we need to be on God's wavelength, and we need to remember that God's call is only the beginning. We have to let him show us where it is leading – in other words, we have to allow God to work within us. This happened with Samuel and Nathaniel, but St Paul is perhaps the best example. After his call, he spent several years reflecting on its meaning before he began his work.

I don't think Paul ever felt worthy – he described himself as the least of the apostles – but he accepted his calling and got on with it. It was Jesus who turned Saul into Paul, turning his life around, realising his potential; and the object of the Christian life is to let Jesus work within us in the same way, pointing the way, perfecting our gifts, and shaping

our lives, our values and our courage. It is Jesus who enables us to get on to God's wavelength, to read the signs of the times, to redraw our map, and to realise our potential.

But we have to give him space and time to do this, and prayer is the way. I think the most important thing we can do to deepen our faith, to discover and use our God-given gifts, is to learn to pray – not just how to pray for others, but praying meditatively with the Bible, or in silent contemplation. Prayer, like language, is a natural capacity that we all possess, but we have to learn to develop it.

Can I ask a straight question? What's your prayer life like? Do you give time and space to Jesus... each day... each week? We are all called to do this, and wherever we are on the journey – not yet started, at the beginning, or somewhere along the way – we need to find someone who will guide us, as Eli guided Samuel, someone who will teach us to pray and to hear God's call. You can go on a course or a retreat (the Retreat Association publishes an annual programme); there may be an event in the parish, like a Week of Prayer; you can ask your priest to teach you, or find another spiritual guide (most dioceses have a spirituality network); or you can find what to do on my website. Whatever we do, we need to be serious about deepening our prayer life; it is, I believe, the single most important thing we need to do as Christians.

God calls you and me just as he called Samuel, Nathaniel, Paul and all the saints around the throne of heaven. It is the God of love who calls. It is the drawing of his Love that we feel, and the voice of his Calling that we hear. Faithful is the One who calls.