



**Sermon preached by Revd Alex Clare-Young on 14<sup>th</sup> January 2024**

Readings: *John 1.43-51; 1 Samuel 3.1-10*

Pray with me: God, here we are. Call our names. Speak, for your servants are listening. Amen.

I saw a joke on social media the other day that said this, “After months and months of January, it’s the 12<sup>th</sup> of January”. Has anyone had a January like that so far? Me too. And so, I am going to be perilously honest with you. I was sat at my laptop last night, grieving for Dharma, one of my dogs who passed away yesterday, muddling through many tasks left undone through a challenging few weeks, reflecting on political, public and environmental situations around the country and the world and wondering what on earth I might say this morning.

I reckon I felt a bit like Samuel saying “Here I am! Here I am! Here I am! Speak, God, your servant is listening”. And the answer stumbled through my overly-tired consciousness in the words of today’s set psalm, the song we have just sung, “Oh God, you search me, and you know me. All my thoughts lie open to your gaze. When I walk or lie down, you are before me, ever the maker and keeper of my days”. And I realised that I needed to tell you everything that I have just told you.

Some ministers and tutors would disagree, suggesting that professionalism in ministry means keeping quiet when things are difficult for us but, increasingly, I am drawn to contemporary practical theologians who point to the God who knows us intimately, and who longs for us to know each other – not at our best, or even at our worst – but just as we are, day by day, journeying together with the one who calls us by name, and who suggest that speaking about that God requires as much vulnerability from the me on the dais – the platform – as it does from the me in the congregation seats, or at home on the couch. As 12<sup>th</sup> century French nun Heloise du Paraclete wrote: “Perhaps by mingling my sighs with yours I may make your sufferings less, for it is said that all sorrows divided are made lighter”.

Today’s readings point to three lessons for daily discipleship and mission.

First, God knows us just as we are.

Secondly, God calls us through other people.

Thirdly, we often fail to recognise God at the margins.

One of the locations of our daily discipleship and mission is the Downing Place Hub, which we will be discussing the future of together on Saturday – please do come if you can. I do not want to – I don’t actually think I can – advise you what to think about the Hub and its future, but Solidarity Hub, and therefore me, spend a lot of time in the Hub, so I have been thinking about it a lot. And it seems to me that the three lessons that I have noticed in today’s readings are related to how we might think about the Hub, so I am going to ask some questions about the Hub as I explore these lessons, that you might like to ponder during the week. They do not have a single right answer: we, as church, must constantly seek God’s still small voice in and around and between the circumstances we find ourselves in, and that is rarely easy.

So first, God knows us just as we are.

Both of today’s readings speak with almost painful honesty about how God goes out of their way to get to know us.

In our Gospel reading, the reason Nathanael, initially suspicious, ends up travelling with Jesus is because Jesus shows that he knows him, saying “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!”. In other translations this is referred to as Nathanael’s guilelessness.

This is not only about knowledge but also about recovery: Jesus recovers the parts of Nathanael that may be considered rude, or socially aloof, including his unflinching honesty about Jesus’s place of origin. Summer Kinaird, an autistic theologian writes on her blog ‘making faith accessible’ that Nathanael is a patron saint of autism, explaining that “When we first meet Nathanael, Jesus calls him an Israelite in whom there is no guile. Guilelessness is one of the hallmarks of autism, and I am encouraged to have Nathanael helping us to navigate a world that is friendlier to lies than truth”. And so Jesus recovers Nathanael’s guilelessness, naming a social dis-grace as a God-given grace.

In our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, God calls Samuel by name four times, even though Samuel does not recognize God’s voice, instead thinking that he is being called by Eli, his foster or adoptive parent.

God knows us just as we are – God knows our names, our skills, and our struggles. But how well do we know ourselves? What can we do, and what might we need to take a break from? What situations are we comfortable with, and what situations do we need to sit back from? Where do our comfort zones need to be stretched? And where do we need to strengthen and be honest about our boundaries? God knows us, calls us, just as we are. As we discuss the Hub’s future, let’s strive to learn, from God, more about ourselves.

Secondly, God calls us through other people.

Samuel was only able to understand God’s voice when Eli explained it to him.

Philip told Nathanael: “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth”. Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see”.

Philip took three key steps here:

First, he explained who Jesus was by going to where Nathanael was, and by speaking in the language of Nathanael’s cultural context. Nathanael knows and cares about Moses and the law and the prophets, and Philip uses that language.

Secondly, he resisted the urge to defend his faith against Nathanael’s guilelessness and scepticism. He does not respond to Nathanael’s anti-Nazarene retort in kind. He stays calm and does not see this as an opportunity to win an argument or a debate. He simply stays quiet. That’s not easy.

Thirdly, he invited Nathanael to come and see. He did not try to persuade Nathanael with words, he knew that Jesus’s actions, Jesus’s way of living out God’s loving-kindness would be enough to attract Nathanael to journey with Jesus.

God calls us through other people, but do we allow God to call other people through us? Do we learn and use the cultural languages of people who are not a part of Sunday-morning church, who think, speak and act in ways we may not understand or like, or do we avoid talking to them, even when they are in this building? Do we take offence and argue with each other and the people we meet who we disagree with? How might we learn to take a pause? Do we only use our words to evangelise? Or might we strive to live - in every small action and conversation – in ways that show God’s loving-kindness to all people? As we discuss the Hub’s future, let’s strive to meet people where they are, and to be ready to invite people to ‘come and see’ God’s love in us.