



Revd Ro's Reflection on The Epiphany 2

1. Samuel 3.1-20. John 1. 43-51

I have chosen to look at the reading from Samuel together with the gospel set for Sunday because there is an obvious link, that of calling. I said last week that baptism is, 'ordination to the holy priesthood of all believers.' We are all called by God to service. We are all so different but we all have gifts and talents, these are as diverse as we are. Not everyone is a priest or a minister, not everyone is skilled enough to do the church accounts, to name but a couple but we are all called to serve in whatever capacity we can.

To widen that further every human being has the choice of how to behave. Just recently we have seen the dark side of that in riots and mayhem in America. However this needs to be put against those who choose peace and goodness. During this pandemic particularly we have seen such selfless humanitarian behaviour by people of all nations and creeds; people who day by day are risking their lives in the service of others. Together with people who are simply showing they care in small acts of kindness.

Mother Theresa recognised this capacity for goodness and service in all of us. There is a lovely picture of the time when she and Princess Diana met. There is the tiny nun and the beautiful young woman who is bending down as they clasp hands. Their eyes are locked together. Mother Theresa apparently said to her,

*'I could not do what you do. You could not do what I do.
But let us both do something beautiful for God.'*

Tragically both were to die within a few days of each other in 1997. The morning after Princess Diana's death they were playing excerpts from her speeches on the radio. I just happened to turn the car radio on to hear her say'

'Show kindness in another's troubles and courage in one's own.'

A good maxim and many people can testify to her compassion for others.

We have free will, again a gift from God. It reminds me of the famous painting by Holman Hunt, 'The light of the World.' Jesus stands at the door and knocks. Looking at it another way Christ is already

within us, our decision is do we obey his call and open the door of our hearts to him in our Christian behaviour.

I guess there is a turning point in all our lives when God calls. I had worshipped here for many years but I felt called to the priesthood and eventually was able to leave school and serve here as a priest.

We are all called to, 'do something beautiful for God.'

The Old Testament reading begins, 'Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli.' To understand this reading we have to go back a little. 1 Samuel 1 tells of, 'a certain man from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah.' He had two wives; the name of one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children.'

We remember Elizabeth's delight when in her old age she finds she will have a child. She says, 'This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.'

In Jewish culture as we know it was shameful for a woman not to be able to have children. Poor Hannah feels this cruelly and to make matters worse she is tormented and bullied by Peninnah. She is so desperate she goes to the temple at Shiloh. This is not the great Temple, Solomon, David's son would build this at Jerusalem but this is the resting place of the Ark.

She 'presented herself before the Lord. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the Lord. ¹⁰She was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord, and wept bitterly. ¹¹She made this vow: 'O Lord of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head.' A Nazirite was a member of a body of Israelites specifically dedicated to the service of God for life and who took the vow Hannah explains here. Samson is an example of another.

This again reminds us of the special child, John the Baptist and the vow he kept.

Poor Hannah prays silently and desperately to God only to be accused of being drunk by Eli! She answers, 'I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord. I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time.' ¹⁷Then Eli answered, 'Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him.' ¹⁸And she said 'Let your servant find favour in your sight.'

Once again we are reminded of Mary's answer to Gabriel. The child is born and named Samuel, 'for she said, 'I have asked him of the Lord.' Her next decision is the amazing one, 'As soon as the child is weaned, I will bring him, that he may appear in the presence of the Lord, and remain there forever; I will offer him as a Nazirite for all time'

She is as good as her word; she returns and presents the child to Eli.

She sings 'The song of Hannah which is so similar in language to The Magnificat.

So the boy remains in the temple 'ministering to God under Eli.' The lovely part is the human detail that Hannah brings Samuel a little coat year by year, an expression of a mother's love. Samuel's Godliness is juxtaposed with the stark revelation that the sons of Eli were, 'scoundrels.' Who had 'no

regard for the Lord.' They should, as Eli's family have served God as priests. Instead it is revealed to him that they will die.

This is where our reading begins and it is so important to put it in context, to know what has gone before, or it is impossible to understand. By this time Eli is old and almost blind. The account is very specific; the lad Samuel is, 'lying down in the temple of the Lord where the ark of God was.'

The Ark is the presence of God among the people. Eventually Solomon will build the great Temple to house it. Samuel is sure that it is Eli who is calling. Eli eventually realises that it is indeed God who is calling the boy. This time he tells the lad to listen to God's word and amazingly we are told, 'Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, 'Samuel! Samuel!' And Samuel said, 'Speak, for your servant is listening.'

God warns that the prophecy regarding the sons of Eli will come true and disaster will fall on his house because Eli did not rebuke them. Poor Samuel obviously doesn't want to tell Eli but Eli demands honesty. Not only are the sons killed in battle but the Philistines steal the Ark and take it away. It is when the news is brought to Eli that he falls, his neck is broken and he dies. The fact that the Ark, the very presence of God, has been stolen by Israel's enemies would have been devastating news. The Ark is however returned by the terrified Philistines when nothing but misfortune comes on them wherever they take it.

Samuel, unlike the sons of Eli, grows in God's service. He was to become one of the greatest Old Testament prophets, a man who spoke the truth of God. We are told 'He did not care about authority and kings; he cared about the truth and spoke it.' It is Samuel who warns the people who are demanding a king that it is not a wise decision though he recognises Saul. Later he will anoint the lad David and tells him he will be King, Indeed the Messiah, Jesus will be of David's line and born in David's city Bethlehem.

The link with this and the gospel passage is that Samuel is called as he lies near the Ark, God's presence with them. Not only that but he meets with God in a very personal and real way as God speaks to him and calls him. That of course is what happens to Nathaniel.

The calling of Nathaniel is recorded in St. John's gospel. After the wonderful prologue, St. John goes on to John the Baptist and Jesus meeting with him at the River Jordan though there is no account of the actual baptism. We have seen John the Baptist explain that he is only the one who is sent by God to prepare the way of the Lord. That he baptises with water for repentance but the one who is greater will baptise with the Holy Spirit. John states that he is not worthy to untie his sandal.

St. John's gospel continues at 1.35. The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples,³⁶ and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!' ³⁷ The two disciples heard him say this and they followed Jesus.'

That tells us a great deal about John. Here he puts his words into practise; he points Jesus out to two of his followers. He knows that they will leave him and follow Jesus. That is as it should be. This illustrates his entirely selfless attitude and his focus on God and Jesus as Messiah. That is his role, to point others to Jesus. It's ours too.

One of the two was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, the other is unnamed. They go to Jesus and his reaction is interesting. He makes the first move by asking, 'What are you looking for?' That is what

God does for us. Humanity was helpless but God came to us in the person of Jesus. Jesus opened his arms for us on the cross. He calls us all.

They said to him, 'Rabbi' (which translated means Teacher), 'where are you staying?' ³⁹He said to them, 'Come and see.'

Jesus then invites them to join him as indeed he invites us. 'They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon.'

St. John gives us cameos and how lifelike they are, how detailed, he even gives the time. It is also interesting to see Andrew's response, not only does he follow Jesus he fetches his brother. ⁴¹'He first found his brother Simon and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah' (which is translated Anointed ⁴²He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, 'You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas' (which is translated Peter).'

The next day Jesus goes to Galilee, finds Philip and says simply, 'Follow me.' There is no question, Philip follows in faith. Once more we have a specific detail, ⁴⁴'Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter.' Just as Andrew did he goes out and calls someone to Jesus. ⁴⁵'Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.' There is no doubt about his message, just as there was no doubt about Andrew's. Both state clearly that they have 'found the Messiah.'

Nathaniel's response is oh so human. ⁴⁶'Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Obviously he didn't think much of it as a place and says so. Nathaniel is from Cana, probably a rival village. What's more there is nothing in scripture about the Messiah coming from Nazareth. His scepticism is so realistic, another of St. John's details. Philip simply replies, 'Come and see,' which echoes Jesus' response to John's two disciples. We would say, 'See for yourself.'

Indeed he does go to Jesus and Jesus' words are fascinating. When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!'

What a wonderful thing to have someone say about you. Here is someone with complete integrity. That is something to aim for!

Nathaniel is impressed by the fact that Jesus knows him without ever having seen him. ⁴⁸'Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?' Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.'

We think of Peter's wonderful moment of insight much later in Jesus' ministry. His answer to Jesus' words, 'Who do people say that I am?' 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'

And yet look at Nathaniel's response to Jesus here at his first sight of him. ⁴⁹'Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' Not quite full knowledge yet, Son of God here would mean Messiah.

We can almost see Jesus' smile when he hears that after such a little sign. Nathaniel, the man of no deceit simply tells the truth. Says what he thinks at once. Tells it like it is.

Jesus must admire his faith when he replies, ⁵⁰ 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.' ⁵¹And he said to him, 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'

At first this seems a strange thing to say but this reference of course is to 'Jacob's ladder,' Genesis.

28.10 'Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place.

¹²And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³And the Lord stood beside him and said, 'I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring;'

¹⁶Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!'

¹⁷And he was afraid, and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.'

¹⁸ So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. ¹⁹He called that place Bethel;'

Bethel means God's house and later it was to become a focus for worship of God, a holy place. This actually takes us back to the Old Testament reading and the calling of Samuel. He lies close to the Ark, the presence of God. God appears to him and calls him. The words are so similar. ¹³'And the Lord stood beside him and said,'

Now Jesus stands here in front of Nathaniel. St. John has said, 'The word became flesh and dwelt among us,' so here we have the very presence of God, God in human form, Jesus standing in front of Nathaniel. Indeed Nathaniel will see greater things. He will walk with God, the Messiah who saves humanity and who will rule at the new creation.

Nathaniel's response is not unquestioning as we have seen but as soon as he sees Jesus he knows this is, 'The Son of God.' St. John puts him at the forefront of Jesus' band of disciples.

Nathaniel is also interesting because he does not appear in the synoptic gospels. The disciple who does appear is called Bartholomew. The prefix bar means son of so Bartholomew means 'son of Tolmai' It has long been held that actually Bartholomew is called Nathaniel and they are one and the same.

Nathaniel is a real example to us, as indeed is Philip. Philip not only follows Jesus, he calls Nathaniel to him. Nathaniel recognises that Jesus is the Messiah and becomes a follower there and then.

The link between the Old Testament and gospel readings is calling. These events happened millennia ago but are so important to us now because Jesus calls all of us, in different and special ways.

Firstly, like Samuel, we need to recognise this call, then like Nathaniel to decide to answer it. To answer God's call we have to step out in faith.

We all have a purpose in our service of God; remember he has no hands but ours, no lips but ours. We have to answer when he calls.

We can make a difference but only if we allow God to transform us so that we too can do something beautiful for Him.

I have said it before but it is worth saying again. At this difficult time it may be impossible to physically be with others who need us but we do God's work simply by picking up the telephone and showing we care.

To go back to the beginning and Mother Theresa's words,

*'I could not do what you do. You could not do what I do.
But let us both do something beautiful for God.'*

~~~~~