

Third Sunday service, 17 Jan 2021

Talk: Listening and responding

The calling of Nathanael is one of Jesus's oddest, and least spectacular, miracles. It's a strange story, hidden away at the start of John's gospel, but it tells us something important about Jesus, and about how God works, and about ourselves.

Indeed, both today's stories are like that – God calling Nathanael and God calling Samuel. They both show God working with unexpected people at an unexpected time, and they show those people reacting in understandable and not-very-holy ways. And that's great because I know that I don't usually react in a particularly holy way when unexpected things happen to me!

And, in the Gospel story, Nathanael seems to be a rather reluctant disciple. At this point Jesus has called a few people to join his group of disciples, including Andrew, Peter and Philip. Philip pretty much immediately goes to find his friend Nathanael, to share the good news that he has found the Messiah, and to invite him to join them.

Nathanael's reaction to this is very human, very relatable (to me at least!): "Yeah, right!" But Philip presses him to come and see for himself. And, to his credit, Nathanael goes. He's open to something new happening even if it comes from a source as unlikely as Nazareth.

And Jesus's reaction to seeing Nathanael is also pretty unusual. Most of the disciples get called to become something greater than what they already are, but Jesus greets Nathanael by saying, "Look – here is a man in whom there is no deceit!" That's a pretty impressive accolade from the Son of God!

And, understandably, this sets Nathanael back on his heels. He doesn't deny it, of course, but asks, "How do you know me?"

And here comes the little miracle – the first miracle in John's Gospel. Jesus says, "I saw you under a fig tree before Philip spoke to you."

It doesn't seem like much, does it? "I saw you earlier." But it clearly means something huge to Nathanael – he immediately says to Jesus: "You are the Son of God, the King of Israel." Nathanael responds to Jesus's knowledge by flipping from scepticism into devotion.

To understand this, we need to recall which Gospel we're reading: John's Gospel. Of all the Gospel writers, John goes in for imagery and metaphor the most. He's not interested in *what happens* so much as *what it means*. So, every story he includes in his Gospel has multiple layers of meaning, deeper truths than first appear.

So, here, Jesus isn't so much claiming to recognise Nathanael from a chance encounter from earlier in the day, before Philip had had the chance to speak to him. No. This

statement by Jesus represents a connection between Him and Nathanael. It echoes the lines from today's psalm:

You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you perceive my thoughts from afar...
You created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb...
all the days ordained for me were written in your book
before one of them came to be.

Nathanael understands here not that Jesus saw him earlier in the day, by accident, but that He *knows* Nathanael. Jesus knows where Nathanael came from, what he's done, who he is at heart.

And so Nathanael responds accordingly: "You are the Son of God, the King of Israel!" This connection between them, this 'seeing' of Nathanael by Jesus, can only mean that Jesus has the knowledge of God. Jesus must be the Messiah, as Philip had said.

So now, let's take a look at the Old Testament story we heard – God's calling of Samuel. In later life, Samuel became one of the greatest prophets in Israel's history. Indeed, Samuel is the one who finds and anoints Israel's first king – and their second!

But, at this point, Samuel's still a young boy. He's serving in the temple at a time in Israel's history when, we're told, the word of the Lord was rare. For Samuel, and for everyone around him, God had spoken in the past but not now. Religion was about maintaining a memory of the past, honouring the past, sustaining the link between Israel and her God even though, as individuals, they don't experience it for themselves.

Much as religion is for many people now, here in the UK.

But God calls to Samuel. God speaks to him directly, personally. God calls Samuel's name, while the boy's sleeping. He's in the temple, with the ark of the Covenant and the sacred lamps, while his master Eli sleeps in his own room.

And Samuel reacts in a real and human way – hearing his name called, he assumes it's his master and sprints off to see what Eli wants!

Eli deals with being woken in the middle of the night quite graciously, I think. I know I get pretty grumpy when children wake me up at night! But he tells Samuel that he didn't call him and to go back to bed.

Three times this happens, and the third time, Eli finally realises that something's going on. That God's involved. He tells Samuel to talk back directly to God – to ask God to speak further, because God clearly has something to say to him! And God's words change Samuel's life, Eli's life, and Israel herself!

Because God speaking to us is only the starting point. We have to listen. We have to respond. For all God's power, God chooses to work with and through people. And, like any relationship, it requires listening, hearing and responding.

For us, here and now, we're still in the season of Christmas – of Incarnation-tide as I said last month. This is the season when we remember God becoming human, God crossing the unimaginable gap between God's *self* and God's *creation*. God's own Word becoming flesh and living among us, talking to us, teaching us.

Because this is what our faith is all about! Christian faith is centred on this one event: God's Word becoming part of humanity. And, now, even though the Incarnation event itself is over, we believe that God continues to speak – indeed that God cannot keep silent.

God spoke to Nathanael and Samuel where they were: Samuel in the temple; Nathanael in the town going about his business.

God speaks to Samuel directly, by name. Even though Samuel misunderstands. Even though Samuel neither expects nor recognises God speaking to him.

God speaks to Nathanael through a friend's insight and persistence. And he learns that Jesus is far more than he had thought or believed possible, and that Jesus knows him to the core, and sees his sitting down and his standing up.

Both Samuel and Nathanael needed someone else for them to hear God speaking – or, rather, to *recognise* God speaking! So, if we think we might've heard something from God, or if we *want* to hear something from God, it's vital to talk to each other about it, to listen to each other. Other people who know God will help us to recognise God's voice.

Sometimes, they might tell us to 'go back to bed'. It might take persistence before you can find someone to really listen and recognise what's we're hearing. (So bear that in mind if anyone asks *you* to help them discern God's speaking!)

Sometimes, our friends will be ahead of us, like Philip was with Nathanael, so that we only understand what's going on after the fact, when we see Jesus face to face.

Jesus is God's eternal Word, always being spoken into Creation. And we are God's children who listen for God's voice calling us.

That voice can come wherever we are and whatever we're doing. We just need to respond – whether that's leaping up like Samuel or in doubt & disbelief like Nathanael!

God's call to us might be something huge – to change our life like Nathanael. Or it might be something that appears small, like the message Samuel was given for Eli.

It might be something that makes us leap up from our bed, or something that we want to walk away from. Either way, we need to respond like Samuel and Nathanael: "You are our Lord, our God, our King. Speak and your servant will listen."