

# Sermon preached at Gisborne, 17 January 2021

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

*Guide us O God, by Your Word and Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover your peace, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.*

## **A calling from God**

The two readings share the same theme, namely ‘a calling from God.’ As we’ll see, God’s call to someone involves a few things: first, God indeed calls men and women as God’s people. Next, in this calling, discerning processes will happen to identify if the call is from God. Lastly, God’s call is also involved in the work of God. The two readings – 1 Samuel and John will help us see these aspects, and it will also help us understand the call of us today.

## **God’s call to Samuel**

God calls people who may not look impressive but who have deep faith in God. 1 Samuel 1 and 2 tell us how Samuel is born and why he is given to the Lord. It shows why Samuel's mother, Hannah makes a vow to dedicate Samuel to God as she prays to God to allow her to conceive a male child. When Samuel begins to live in the Temple, Eli and his sons are priests. Samuel is the outsider of the priestly line, it is their birthright to service in the Temple. But the sons of Eli were scoundrels: they have not acted justly. They have used their position for personal gain instead of service to the Lord. God's call to Samuel shows us that the birthright doesn't guarantee their priestly status forever, but the hearts to serve the Lord.

Besides, Samuel lives in a time when 'the word of the Lord was rare.'<sup>1</sup> This situation continues the problem from the end of Judges, where “all the people did what was right in their own eyes.”<sup>2</sup> Even though God was the only king of Israel, people did not regard God as their king. Priests were not different, either as seen in the case of Eli’s sons.<sup>3</sup> The times are as dark as the night that falls at the beginning of the story. Eli’s eyes are dim also, which symbolically tells us that the weakened leadership of Eli and a hopeless social state of Israel.

God’s call to someone has a discerning process. When Samuel is called by God three times, he doesn't know that God calls him as he did not know the Lord yet.<sup>4</sup> Samuel needs guide from Eli. When God calls him for the fourth time, Samuel doesn’t say, ‘Here I am’ as he did before. But ‘Speak, for your servant is listening’ as instructed by Eli. Discerning the call from God means to know God intimately, and it means the service to God. Just as moving into the promised land did not guarantee a perfect life, neither does God’s call to serve. In verses 3:11-20, which we didn’t read, God’s words to Samuel are hard to hear and even harder to speak to others, for they involved judgment against Eli’s own children. Like Samuel, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, God’s call often involves working to change human systems that are broken, leading one down difficult paths.

## **Jesus’ call to Philip and Nathanael**

Similar to God’s call to Samuel, Jesus takes initiatives to call Philip and consequently Nathanael. John reports that Jesus ‘found’ (εὕρισκω: to find) Philip and said to him, ‘follow (ἀκολουθέω - *akoluthéo*) me.’ In the Gospels, the word ‘follow’ primarily means discipleship to Jesus. John doesn't tell us what made Philip follow Jesus. In the case of Nathanael, he is found by Philip. But for Nathanael, like Samuel, he needs to discern who this Jesus is and what the call means to him. When Nathanael expresses scepticism about “anything good coming out of Nazareth,” Philip doesn’t seem to list reasons. He simply says, “Come and see.” Nathaniel comes and sees for himself. Discerning the call from Jesus is done with the help of Philip. In turn, it also helps

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Samuel 3:1

<sup>2</sup> Judges 21:25

<sup>3</sup> 1 Samuel 2:11-17

<sup>4</sup> 1 Samuel 3:7

Nathanael see himself clearly, which leads him to faith in Jesus. Then tasks are given not only to Philip and Nathanael but also to all readers of this Gospel: “Very truly, I tell you (ὁμῶν, plural you), you (plural) will see the heavens open, and the messengers of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”<sup>5</sup> The ascending and descending ladder recalls Jacob’s dream in Genesis 28:10-17, and the naming of the place, “Bethel,” the house of God. It means that Philip, Nathanael and also we are going to witness the work of the Son of Man by becoming the bearers and the witnesses of the good news of Jesus Christ.

### **God’s call to us today**

In our storytime, we heard a story titled, ‘the king’s ears,’ and the question was ‘what made the barber sick?’ As we see, keeping the secret of the king in himself only has made the barber sick. If we think about the story concerning the theme – *a calling from God*, what is the calling from God here? The barber was threatened by the king if he spilled the beans. On the surface, having floppy ears like a donkey may not be a big deal had the king been one of the common people. But he was the king of the country, and everything had to be perfect and flawless. This sort of thing still applies to the present – the age of information and SNS (Social Networking Service) whenever we read about gossips and news about politicians, the rich and the celebrities. The call from God to the barber then is that the plain truth in which the king is just like the rest of the other people who may have flaws, weaknesses, warts and all! Since the barber was forbidden from spreading the truth to the public, the oppression has made him sick enough unto death. In this story, we also see the discerning process. The advice from the wise man helped the barber to go to the field and to speak out the truth into the hole in the ground. The work seemed completed, but not quite yet! The ground couldn’t keep the secret either, nor the reeds. Eventually, the secret became the public knowledge to all the village people. So what does it mean about the call of us?

We found a few common aspects so far. First, we may easily miss God's call or attribute it to a human instead. In speaking of their call, some people may describe a major disruption in their lives. Others may talk about a quiet, slow awakening – perhaps to a life of service or an injustice that needs to be addressed. Like Samuel, they often tell about a period of uncertainty, regarding what they are being called to do or be. As Samuel needed Eli to show him what these stirrings mean, it often takes others similar to Philip for Nathanael, and the wise man for the barber in our lives to aid us in understanding the call from God before us.

Second, when we know that we are called by God, it also means that we are commissioned to do the work of God. When Samuel heard God's call the third time, he responded as Eli had instructed, and God told him what message to deliver to Eli. The barber did it also by following the instructions that the wise man gave him, and the soil and the reeds did their part too. For Philip and Nathanael, they had to witness the Passion and crucifixion of Jesus while keeping their faith in Jesus. Are we called by God? If so, how do we discern it, and what are our tasks to carry on? The barber's case tells us a lot. We know the truth and what the good news is. But are we telling the truth – the good news of Jesus Christ to the world or holding it back to keep in our hearts? The good news of Jesus Christ is that while we were still sinners, we were saved by the word of God became flesh Jesus Christ. He has freed us from the bondage of life, and untruth in which we became our own kings. Yet, Jesus says that the work of God is to believe in Jesus Christ whom God has sent.<sup>6</sup> May God help us live for the call from God today and always. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> John 1:51 - καὶ λέγει αὐτῷ· ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω ὁμῶν, ὄψεσθε τὸν οὐρανὸν ἀνεωγῆτα καὶ τοὺς ἀγγέλους τοῦ θεοῦ ἀναβαίνοντας καὶ καταβαίνοντας ἐπὶ τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου.

<sup>6</sup> John 6:29