

John 1: 43 - end and 1 Samuel 3: 1 – 10

I don't know if this is a sign of age or says something about personality, but Judith and I both have our favourite mugs – I'm less particular about what the coffee or camomile comes in, but a cuppa definitely tastes better in one of the select few mugs. One of our often used mugs which I'm holding here was given out at some Diocesan Conference a few years ago, and it simply says on it "The hope of our calling". Maybe more commonly used these days than the word calling is the word vocation. Somebody just this week said how staggered they were by the dedication of exhausted nurses right now, but added that that dedication often goes with a sense of vocation.

We often think of **vocation as to do with a career** : working in mental health or teaching are often described as vocations; becoming a priest or nun is called a vocation. So we tend to use it to refer to a lifetime's work, not just a 1 or 2 year stint. And usually, we use it in the context of what are seen as the "caring professions".

But let's just see what insights these 2 episodes might give us about calling or vocation:

Just to remind us, the first, Old Testament, reading was the boy Samuel lying in bed, and hearing a voice calling his name. And the second was Nathaniel, minding his own business, being found by his friend Philip, who enthusiastically says "You must come and meet this man Jesus"

(1) **And the first thing both these episodes have in common is that neither of them gave any indication of having anything to do with a lifetime's calling.** Samuel simply heard his name being called, and just wanted to know how he should answer. He wasn't thinking about the years ahead, just what to do in that immediate situation. Nathaniel likewise: his friend Philip says 'come with me and meet this man'. All he had to decide right then was whether or not to bother to go with Philip to meet the man. Again, it was a decision about what to do at that moment.

A big calling usually just consists of lots of little ones.

Callings are more often than not about small to medium sized steps. For both Samuel and Nathaniel, the immediate decision as to what to do now led on to other steps. But right now, it was of itself quite a small step.

The truth is, calling is much more about what we do right now. It's about 'shall I ring up that person who I think is pretty lonely or struggling?', 'Shall I volunteer to help out with the Covid vaccine project?', or 'I struggle daily with health issues, but I also keep feeling that I want to pray each day for those working in our surgery, so I'm going to do that'. Calling is about the small or medium sized steps now.

(2) Another similarity is that in both of these, **other people were involved** in the calling process. I once heard a lecture about the difference between Asian and European culture, and the lecturer said that in Asia, a person is primarily part of a community, and secondly an individual, whilst in European culture, a person is primarily an individual, and only secondly, part of a community. And I think that has often coloured our view of vocation or calling. Obviously, it helps vastly if a person has an inner conviction or passion, but it seems that very often God will include a third party

in the process of calling. So Eli told Samuel how to respond, and Philip urged Nathaniel to come and meet Jesus.

It doesn't mean that the majority opinion is always right, but it does mean that because we are part of a community, others are very likely to play a role in calling

One of my favourite saints of history is St. Martin of Tours.

371 AD Father Martin was a humble parish priest, but a lot of people felt he'd be just right to become the next bishop. They also knew he would refuse. So, a plot was hatched: he was urged to come to minister to someone sick in Tours — and when he got there, the man wasn't sick at all. Martin was escorted to the church, where he reluctantly allowed himself to be consecrated bishop. According to one version, he was so unwilling to be made bishop that he hid in a barn full of geese, but their cackling at his intrusion gave him away to the crowd, so when he arrived at the church, he was looking a bit dishevelled. I'd love to know if that bit is true. But the point is, it was others, rather than Martin himself, who recognised his incredible gifting.

On a very different level, I remember a very engaging, winsome and straightforward speaker talking about someone who was pretty patronising to him after a talk he'd given: most people were really grateful, afterwards, he said, "this woman came up to me, and said 'You're far too simple in your style. I'm a teacher and I know a lot about this, and you really do need to have a less simple and straightforward' ". IN his own words, he wanted to reply 'same to you, with knobs on', but he was gracious. The next morning, someone he knew fairly well but who hadn't heard that woman's comments, phoned and said, 'Eric, I don't know why I'm phoning you, but I just want to say, never lose your simple, straightforward, engaging approach. It's such a gift.' Maybe that was a reassurance of a calling, but nonetheless, another person played a major role in affirming that calling.

Be alert for God's calling, for whatever undertaking, however small, to come sometimes via others.

(3) The final similarity is that neither Samuel nor Nathaniel got off to a flying start. Samuel thought that the voice was that of the old man in the next room, and Nathaniel was very put off by the information that Jesus was from that backwater Nazareth. Neither responded well at the outset: Samuel through ignorance, and Nathaniel through wrong assumptions, you might even say, prejudice.

Sometimes we are slow on the uptake. But God is more patient than people usually are. Sometimes he has to wear us down a bit. We might miss a call for a while, but that doesn't usually invalidate it. So never think, I've missed the boat. It's too late now. Usually it isn't too late at all. God's calling is for today, and he's fairly reliable at giving reminders.