

Sermon for Chesterton, Epiphany 2, 2018

The Scripture readings for this Sunday contain two wonderful accounts of what it means to be called by God. Let us examine each in turn, before asking what significance they can have for our lives today as followers of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

The boy Samuel was already marked out by God for life as a future prophet, but above all he was a child born of prayer and tears. His childless mother Hannah had been brutally mocked and bullied by her jealous rival. But Hannah, comforted by her husband Elkanah, went to the Lord's shrine at Shiloh. There she called upon God in her need, (with "great anxiety and vexation"), and he answered her in her distress. The prophet Eli, seeing her praying silently and in such anguish, predicted that her prayer would be answered. She conceived and bore a son, whom she and Elkanah named Samuel.

But in an act of remarkable generosity, Hannah went back to Shiloh where she offered her child to Eli the priest, dedicating him to the Lord. Though she bore five more children, it is clear that the child of her tears remained of special importance even if she only saw him once a year, when she went up to Shiloh to worship at the shrine. There, we are told "the boy Samuel grew up in the presence of the Lord."

It was a spiritually barren season then in Israel. Eli's sons were scoundrels and wastrels who had forgotten God and all that he had done for them. We are told that "the word of the Lord was rare in those days" and "that visions were not widespread."

One night, Samuel went off to bed in the temple, lying down close to the Ark of God: then began the remarkable sequence of events leading to a new relationship between God and this chosen child. Three times in the semi-darkness, the boy heard a call. On the third occasion Eli realised that it was the Lord who was calling Samuel. He advised him therefore as to how he should respond. He was to say, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening." It is a beautiful story of calling, or as we might say today, of vocation. Our word "vocation" comes indeed from the Latin word *vocare*, "to call." But there are a few details that are worth highlighting to bring out the richness of the tale.

Samuel was not lying down just in any old place but in a very holy one indeed, the house of God, close to the Ark. We need to forget all the popular fiction about the famous Ark of the Covenant and concentrate on what it really was. It was the gold-covered box containing the stone tablets of the Law, given by God to Moses on Sinai. It had accompanied the Israelites through their desert wanderings, as far as its shrine at Shiloh, where Eli and Samuel lived. The Ark eventually ended up in the magnificent temple built by Solomon on Mt Zion in Jerusalem but was lost forever when that Temple was destroyed. After that it disappeared

from history entirely, notwithstanding periodic reappearances thanks to Hollywood, in films like *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

The Ark represented the presence of God with his people as they moved forward through the wilderness and settled in the Promised Land. Samuel was therefore going to sleep in God's presence, resting in his temple. But power went forth from the Ark, for it was after all God's dwelling place. The voice of the Lord pierced the semi-darkness and called the boy. Or perhaps we might understand it better as a kind of whisper. In that dimly-lit twilight zone, with the lamp of God still faintly burning, the All-Powerful and Almighty Lord, who gave the Law on Sinai, spoke, whisperingly, to a child Carefully instructed by Eli who had known the Lord for so many years, Samuel began a discussion with God, adopting the only attitude possible when addressed by the divine voice – one of attentive listening.

This story is an *almost* perfect account of vocation, of being called by God. He is not some distant deity up there in the heavens. God speaks! The Jews have always known that and it is their special calling – and terrible burden – to carry that knowledge throughout history. A theologian once wrote, "Where others perceived only infinite silence, Israel heard a voice" – and how they have suffered for that! Samuel too, this child of Israel, in the darkness of the night, heard that voice. It launched him on his career as a prophet. He would choose and anoint David King of Israel and from David would come the long-awaited Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, who is Christ the Lord.

I have said that the story of Samuel is an *almost* perfect account of vocation. But it is not for us Christians the *most* perfect one. That is reserved to the New Testament as we see in today's section from John's Gospel. It has to be so, because as we learn from the opening of that Gospel, which we heard at Christmas, in Jesus God became present to us in a new and wonderful way that cannot be equalled or surpassed: "The Word became flesh and lived amongst us." In him God became our brother, without ceasing to be what he ever was and will always be - the All-powerful and Almighty Lord.

But in his beloved Son, born a vulnerable child in Bethlehem and raised on a cross at Jerusalem, God showed us that his almightiness is not a matter of human power but of infinite loving-kindness. Jesus replaced the Ark of the Covenant and the Temple (though not the Jewish people!) for he was God present as a human being, in the wonder of the Incarnation.

The calling of Nathanael in today's gospel is an amusing story. He is ready with the glib answer, the quick dismissal and the certainty that he already knows it all. "Nazareth!?" he exclaims, "That dump?" Nothing good could ever be expected from such a place! His response was not without reason. Nazareth was after all a village "in the sticks," in distant Galilee, looked down on by the residents of Jerusalem. Nor should we forget that later in John's Gospel the Pharisees also dismiss Jesus because a prophet supposedly does not come

from Galilee. So we can give Nathanael a kind of fool's pardon. We too would probably have reacted in a similar way.

But it took just one encounter with Jesus and that was it! He recognised in this Rabbi no less a person than the Son of God and King of Israel himself. Like Samuel, he had come into the presence of God, not this time in a wooden container like the Ark but through the living Ark, Jesus Christ. And Christ did not have to call three times. Nathanael had only to hear the voice but once to have his heart opened by the Word. He became a disciple, meaning in Greek "a learner" - a pupil in the school of Christ, with an open ear and a listening heart ready for the teaching of the Master.

There are many things these passages of Scripture can say to us, for the Word of God was not just spoken in the past. God speaks his Word to us today. He speaks especially in Jesus who is God's Word-made-flesh, his Living Word, risen from the dead and with us as we worship.

So, therefore, let me suggest three things we can learn from today's readings what it is to be called by God.

The first is that we need to broaden our understanding of the word "vocation," which we sometimes associate too narrowly with a call to ministry in the Church. Every human being is called by God and has a vocation. We Christians receive that call in baptism but it has to be followed through the whole of life, with all its ups and downs.

The second is that God's call is always to relationship with him. But like all relationships that calls for dialogue - and like all dialogues for speaking and listening. Prayer means developing an open ear after we have heard God whispering our name and responding to him. Without such response, though God goes on calling, the dialogue may wither and die on our part.

Finally, Jesus is the place, the new Ark where we encounter God. Staying close to him, we hear his voice. It reaches us through many other voices and places: in the Holy Scriptures, in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, in our daily lives with those who love us (and sometimes even those who hate us!). In Christ the angels of God ascend and descend to us. We become learners, disciples in the school of Jesus. If we open the inner ear of the heart and listen attentively we will catch his whispers and reply: "Speak Lord, your servant is listening: you are the Son of God and the King of Israel."

