

Sermon for the Second Sunday of Epiphany - 14 January 2018

Readings: 1 Samuel 3, 1-10
Psalm 139, 1-9
John 1, 43-end

May I speak in the name of God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Philip said to Nathaniel, 'Come and see.' Our readings today are all about invitations; about being invited and how we respond to those invitations. When we think about invitations from God, or from Jesus, we often talk about being called, rather than being invited, but we shouldn't be confused by this sort of language. Being called, whether literally by a voice as Samuel was, or in some other way, means receiving an invitation. 'Come and see' is just another sort of invitation and one which we are all well used to receiving in the form of advertisements.

What is an advertisement but an invitation to come and see a thing or a service that claims to have some special feature that we might find attractive? We live in a society where most things - not everything but most things - are supplied by organisations whose sole purpose is to make money for those who own them and they need us to come, see and then pay over our money for whatever it is they are selling. We are so deluged with these invitations to buy, to taste, to join the fun, that we can become resistant to them, resenting their constant interruption of our lives, in the middle of TV programmes, swamping our newspapers and of course popping up all over social media and filling our letterboxes too. It becomes so much more difficult for us to filter out the rubbish and hear the invitation that has real meaning and real potential.

Most of these invitations are harmless. We can decide to accept them or not. But we can also be invited to do lots of things that are not good for us, especially if we are at a young and impressionable age - have another drink; try this pill, it won't do you any harm, just try a puff on this, it will make you feel happy. Being invited can be dangerous and we have to keep our wits about us. Like Mary when the angel appeared, we ponder what sort of greeting this might be.

Two thousand years ago, those who were to become disciples of Jesus didn't have the same problem. If they travelled the road to Emmaus, they were not distracted by endless advertising hoardings. When Nathaniel was sitting under the fig tree, he wasn't pondering where to do his shopping or which insurance policy was best for his car. But what was he doing? We aren't told but whatever it was, Jesus knew that he had the potential to be a disciple.

In the same way, God knew that Samuel had the potential to grow into a wise judge and

prophet who would lead Israel at the start of the nation's path to greater things under Saul, David and Solomon. Unlike Nathaniel, it is more obvious from scripture that Samuel would become something special as his very birth was God's answer to his mother's prayer, but there is also a similarity in that both Samuel and Nathaniel are initially unsure about the invitation. Samuel not unreasonably thinks he is being called by his master Eli, whilst Nathaniel can't believe that Israel's saviour could come from a humble village like Nazareth. Again like Mary, they needed a bit more persuasion.

Our second reading, the extract from Psalm 139, beautifully links these two stories and explains to us how it is that God might choose these particular people to play a part in the developing story of humankind's relationship with God. I have to confess an interest here as this psalm is my own favourite and one which I studied at great length in the past and which formed an important part of my own spiritual journey. It's a pity you have only heard part of it; I do recommend you try and read the whole psalm when you can.

But for now the point is that God knows us through and through. God is all around us; God knows all that we think and do, and it is because of God that we are here at all. God created us and sustains us. Without God, we are just individual atoms scattered across a faceless universe. God knows what we are capable of doing and so God knew what Samuel and Nathaniel could do; he knew more about them than they could have known about themselves. Samuel of course was only a young boy and could not have foreseen his future as a revered prophet and judge. Nathaniel is a different case but we are not told why he was chosen, any more than we are told about Philip or any of the other disciples. It has been suggested that perhaps Nathaniel, when he was under the fig tree, was praying to God that he would see the Messiah. After all, he could well have heard stories about John the Baptist and his prophecies of the one who was to come after him and be greater than him. Whatever the truth of that, Nathaniel was receptive to Jesus when he demonstrated that, despite coming from Nazareth, he had gifts beyond that of an ordinary teacher.

Samuel and Nathaniel were exceptional people; they are both mentioned in scripture. It is easy for us to imagine them being invited by God to play the roles intended for them. But what about us? We can't all be exceptional with historic parts to play. No, but then we aren't living through biblical times either. We could say, like the Samuel reading, that 'the word of the Lord is rare in these days; visions are not widespread.' but I think it is a mistake to think that God would always make invitations in exactly the same way throughout history. The turning point came with Jesus

who made it clear that, whatever had happened before, God's grace was now freely available to us all and not just those destined for a particular role.

So God is still with us; God is still acquainted with all our ways. God still wants to invite us all to share in his kingdom, a universal kingdom of peace, of mutual love and support. That invitation to come and see is open to everyone; we just have to be open to receive it. Many people have written or spoken about how they feel they have received God's invitation. For some it may come in those silent moments around prayer or meditation, through stillness and listening. For others it might be through a book, a picture or some other work of art where the artist has somehow made a pathway by which the invitation can reach us. It might come in a visit to a holy place or in a striking moment in worship. There are probably as many ways of hearing God's invitation as there are people. No-one can forecast how it will happen for them.

And when we do hear it, can we respond? Does it just get drowned in the cacaphony of other invitations that take up our time and our attention? That can so easily happen. The rush, the stridency and pressure of modern life can deafen our senses so we can't pick up the signals but they are there all the same.

God wants us to live full lives but that doesn't mean burning ourselves out. A full life includes leaving time to just be, to be part of God's world, to watch and to listen, to wait for that invitation to come and see, the invitation that will change our lives for ever as it did Nathaniel's; the invitation that will allow us to see that God loves us as we are and that he wants to share that love with us and for all time. It is an invitation that should give us hope in all those difficulties and disappointments in our own lives, that cuts through all those other false offers that fill our heads with ideas of glamour, money and worldly status. It is an invitation to let go and live.

How can we not say yes?

Amen