

The strangeness of callings

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 14 January 2024

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Epiphany 2B

1 Samuel 3: 1-10; Psalm 139: 1-8, 13-18; John 1: 43-51

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

Spiritual callings are typically strange, don't you think? As our scripture readings today attest, they often occur to the strangest of people, and/or in the strangest of circumstances. Most importantly of all, they are frequently strange in character. After all, they come from what we call divinity, which, to our ordinary ways of the world, is typically always, strange or slant – even, if you will, queer. Our own experiences, as well as today's readings, bear this out, just as they invite us to listen and respond to further strange calls of our strange God in our own day. For as he is recorded, in regard to the faith tradition he began, the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, put it well in saying that:

*(Faith)... began as something strange and it will return to being strange, so blessed are the strangers.*¹

Before pondering the strangeness of callings to faith today, let us reflect briefly on the great scripture passages we heard this morning. Now, at once, we have to recognise that these have particular contexts and characteristics. For, like experiences of conversion, we cannot simply trace golden common threads in scripture, or in history. In the past, for example, some Christian thinkers have spent a good deal of time suggesting that a particular kind of conversion experience can be identified across Christian history: and that great figures such as Saint Paul, Augustine of Hippo, Martin Luther, Jean Calvin, and John Wesley, all had the same experiences of call.

There is still a tendency among some to try to do this. Frankly, whilst we can see some similarities in some cases, this just does not stand up. Instead, such attempts are clearly ideological. Like those who tell us we can only be a true Christian if we have had their kind of experiences of conversion, call, and/or baptism in the Holy Spirit, the reality is that encounters with the divine are far, far, more diverse and mysterious. It is not possible to tidy up God, and how he/she/they relate(s) to us.

And that too, is of course a salutary lesson to anyone preaching, or offering reflection on such things. A preacher is, in my view, allowed a little rhetorical leeway and focused clarity, in order to convey meaning. It is both valid, and necessary, to draw out life-giving themes and trajectories from scripture, tradition, and life more broadly. Yet there is always a risk. So, as ever, take what I say with a pinch of salt, and delve deeper!

¹ In Hadith reported by Abu Huraira

As with other choices by the lectionary compilers, the use of today's Gospel reading in itself reflects particular ways in which our scripture texts are typically assessed. Let us, for today, pass over the question of whether it is a little odd to use a passage from John's Gospel so early in a lectionary year focused on Mark's Gospel. For it, and our reading from 1 Samuel 3 – and, for that matter, today's Psalm (139) - have clearly been chosen to fit the Epiphany lectionary schema in which the great theme of our spiritual calling, follows on from the birth of Jesus and visit of the Magi, and the baptism of Jesus. Therefore this story is really about something else more than spiritual calling. Above all, it is about God's revealing: about theophany, divine manifestation rather than human experience as such.

Our Gospel story, set as it is in the very first of John's chapters, is particularly concerned to set the scene for what follows. If we couple it with the previous verses, to which it is intimately linked, we see that John is especially keen to give us symbolic titles for Jesus which speak of God's manifestation in them. In the verses immediately before today's reading, we read of John the baptizer, Andrew and Simon Peter, and of Jesus spoken of as Lamb of God, Rabbi, and Messiah (otherwise known, in Greek, as Christ). Now, with Philip and Nathaniel, Jesus is revealed as both Son of God, and, in a term especially beloved of Mark's Gospel, Son of Man - or, if you prefer, the Beloved One of God, and the Divine-Human One.

Now, we do well not to become too hung up on how we feel about any one or more of these titles, and still less how we prefer to translate them. As I said earlier with experiences of conversion, the point is not to try to fit ourselves in a box of someone's else's interpretations, or to create our own ideological versions of faith: the point is rather to let them speak to us, as symbols, of what lies in and beyond them. For the titles our Faith gives to Jesus are not to be read as flat, still less as literal, in a very concrete or ideological sense.

Rather, these titles are like multidimensional icons, and they have meaning for us as we allow ourselves to open up to the divine reality which they reveal and which may speak to us afresh. Hence, in regard to our theme of spiritual calling today, the vital words for us to take up from this passage are those of Philip to Nathaniel: '*Come and See*'.

'*Come and See*': in the verses immediately before today's Gospel reading, these are the same words Jesus says to Andrew and Simon Peter. '*Come and see*': this expression is indeed used four times in John's Gospel: being addressed also to the Samaritan woman at the well and to Thomas at the Resurrection. '*Come and See*': in each case, those to whom these words are addressed are encountering something strange to them. In each case, they ask what are ultimately somewhat banal and flat questions. In each case, rather than being given a straightforward answer, they are invited into opening themselves up to deeper mystery and to experiences of spiritual adventure.

'*Come and see*': is that how we, you, and I, understand the call of faith? Is that how others in our world today encounter Christianity: as an invitation to deep adventure, rather than as an ideology with restrictive limitations?

Our first reading this morning certainly reflects a similar time in which the faith tradition of Jesus had become static, frozen, and obsessed with flattened features of faith. That is key to the significance of Eli, who, in a number of ways, is the central human figure in the story. Speaking personally, I can identify with him. For Eli is ageing and standing in the midst of a faith tradition in serious decline. Its fires of liberation, justice, and transformation of life, have long since burned down, replaced by self-concerned institutional forms and owned by a generation of adherents more concerned for its, and their own, power and well-being, than the awesome adventure of journeying further with the living God.

Nor is Eli exempt from this spiritual degradation. His age, his restricted vision, and his other infirmities are symbolic of his, and his people's, spiritual situation. He appears to be one of the last of his line, a priest who is not only compromised himself but who is manifestly unable to rekindle the light of faith. All Eli can do is to try to keep the light alive, even if he is not only struggling to show it in his life but at times even struggling even to see it at all. Yet, happily, that is enough, because of God's grace.

There are three particular features I would therefore highlight from this story this morning: features which resonate with our Gospel reading too. The first is the primary focus on God. I have already mentioned how our Gospel reading is principally a story of divine epiphany rather than a human-centred account of spiritual possibilities. This is partly because John's Gospel has what scholars call a 'high' Christology, emphasising the divinity of Christ rather than approaching Jesus from 'below'.

Yet, whether 'high' or 'low', telling stories from a more divine or more human perspective, all faith scriptures have been assembled principally to point us to the primacy of God's grace. In our first reading, we therefore hear a key affirmation that, despite the darkness of the times, *'the lamp had not yet gone out.'* In other words, despite near blindness to the living God - including within faith circles, as represented by Eli - the rumour, and still more the presence, of God was still alive, however much it was being disregarded.

Indeed, God was about to do a new thing, surprising though it might seem. As God says to Samuel, once he is focused on listening: *'See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle.'* This too is a word for our own days, if we are able to re-focus.

Secondly, our readings speak of how re-connecting with the living God comes when human beings de-centre themselves. Note well, how Samuel keeps running to Eli and says 'Here I am, for you called me.' It is only when Eli, out of his own spiritual slowness, realises that God is at work that he gives the appropriate advice: go back, and if God calls again, say *'speak, for your servant is listening.'*

It is not Samuel and human ego and capability that matters, but waiting on God; not *'here I am'* but listening and participating in the divine. We may have the eagerness of youth, like Samuel, or the persistence of age, like Eli, but our faith will not blossom unless we re-orientate ourselves and rest in God.

Thirdly, this passage, like today's Gospel, directs to the strange ways in which God speaks and works afresh. In the first story, God is beginning again through a child. In the Gospel, it is through a carpenter's son from the bad lands of Galilee, and his associated extraordinary jumble of disciples. Note well Nathaniel's instinctive response to Jesus' background: *'can anything good come out of Nazareth?'*

No wonder Matthew and Luke's Gospels draw attention to Bethlehem, David's city, as their affirmed birthplace of Jesus. For Nazareth is not an obvious place from which holiness and renewal might be expected to come. Again, our stories are saying, God's ways are not straightforward human ways, but strange ways, typically calling strangely, often to seemingly strange people, in strange places and circumstances.

What does this mean to us today? Well, it encourages us to know that, far from simply dying out, the lamp of God is still alive and God's voice is still calling. Typically however, as in these stories, God is calling in new ways to unlikely people in unlikely places. Perhaps, like Samuel, that call is to you, and you may need to stop and listen.

Perhaps, like Eli, that call is not directly to you, but still involves you, in helping others to stop and listen.

Either way, our readings call us all into transformation: to stopping, and listening afresh. That is the invitation to us at this time and in the days ahead, especially this Lent: the invitation to '*come and see*' where God is calling, as we change our focus and de-centre ourselves and our self-regarding ways.

For '*come and see*', through divine transformation, is true spirituality, genuine calling, the great adventure.

So, if something strange is stirring in your life, listen, and, as Jesus encouraged Nathaniel, take a step forward into the strangeness of God.

For, as the Prophet rightly said: '*(Faith)... began as something strange and it will return to being strange, so blessed are the strange ones.*'

Amen.