

Second Sunday of Epiphany 2021 (17.01.2021)

1 Samuel 3: 1 – 10; John 1: 43 – end

It's the Second Sunday of the Epiphany season. On Friday someone asked me when all this Epiphany season malarkey came in. I think the answer is that it's always been there. Certainly the Sundays after the Feast of the Epiphany and before the Sundays before Lent begin have always been called the Sundays after Epiphany. And the readings have always nodded in the same direction. I think perhaps what has changed is that over the last 15 or 20 years there has been an increasing emphasis in Anglican spirituality to think in terms of seasons; in terms of setting aside a few weeks at a time to unpackage a particular aspect of what it is to be a follower of Jesus; and in terms of looking at whatever particular readings we have through the lens of that particular season.

So now it's epiphany season and we're asking ourselves what things about God are revealed by the

birth of Jesus - by Jesus being born and God taking on human flesh. It's a good discipline. Because a besetting sin of Christians is to rush ahead and talk about what is revealed by Jesus dying for us. But we'll come to that in due course. It's important, to be sure. But there's more to Jesus than him dying for us. It's just as important that he was born for us.

So what do we learn in this morning's readings that we wouldn't know if God hadn't taken on human flesh? Well, at first glance, you might say not a lot. We've got a reading about Jesus calling people to follow him. But we've also got a story that pre-dates Jesus, from the Old Testament about God calling someone to serve him. And Samuel isn't the only example of an Old Testament figure to have a very direct experience of being called by God. Think of Jeremiah being appointed by God to be a prophet and arguing with God that he couldn't be because he was a mere boy. Think of Amos being called by God from following his flock of sheep and saying "I am no prophet, not a

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prophet's son; but I am a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees.”

And we also today have Jesus describing himself as the Son of Man upon whom angels will ascend and descend. But that also is an allusion to the Old Testament, to Jacob's ladder, the ladder Jacob saw in his dream when he'd slept with a stone as his pillow and had wrestled with God in the night. But, although it may be an allusion to it, a reference to it, it's not just 'same old same old.' What Jacob saw was just a vision, a one-off, a prototype for what the birth of Jesus ushers in once and for all.

Because of the birth of Jesus, God can never again be understood as just an old man in the sky. God is with us, Emmanuel, and there is an interconnectedness between the Godhead and the human condition. This interconnectedness is two-way. On the one hand, we are in a way absorbed into the Godhead: we are transformed; we are equipped by the Holy Spirit to be

more than we ever could be in our own strength; we are given a new dignity which means we are not defined by the limits of our material circumstances – it should never be possible to look down on anyone, because all are elevated.

On the other hand, God is involved in the ordinariness of human life because of this interconnectedness. And this helps us to understand the way, in Jesus, God calls us. It helps us to unpack what we mean when we say that all people have a vocation by virtue of their Baptism. It helps us understand how we can faithfully be responding to our calling in the ordinariness of everyday life.

Some people, like Samuel and Jeremiah and Amos, are called to give up what they are doing and to assume a different role. Some, like Nathanael, like Samuel, will discern God's call in a preternatural experience: Samuel heard God's voice in the night; Nathanael was seen by Jesus sitting under a fig tree before Philip

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went to fetch him. That preternatural: it goes beyond what is normal or natural. For most of us, though, it won't be like that.

The real life inspiration for Lara in Boris Pasternak's *Dr Chivago* was Olga Ivinskaya. In a love letter to her, Pasternak said, "When a great moment knocks on the door of your life, it is often no louder than the beating of your heart, and it is very easy to miss it."

Because of the birth of Jesus, every moment is a great moment. Because of the birth of Jesus, our faith is more than the religious practice we indulge ourselves in on a Sunday. It extends through from Monday to Saturday as well, meaning that we have an everyday faith; and everything we do every day is an expression of our vocation and is to be done for the glory of God.

That's easy to say, of course, if you're a doctor or a nurse, especially in times like these. I'm sure there are doctors and nurses who are taking succour and

deriving resilience from their conviction that what they're doing for the least of their coronavirus patients, they're doing for Christ. It's easy to discern a vocation in a job like being a teacher; or a great musician when every concerto you play is played for the glory of God. But it also means if you're a bricky, every wall you build is built for the glory of God; if you work in a supermarket, every shelf you stack is stacked for the glory of God. And it also means that our idea of vocation is not limited to the activities we perform. If you've arrived at a stage of life when your world is shrinking, it's possible to find that there is a vocation, a dignity, a stature in waiting because God is with us, Emmanuel, because we have seen heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man,

Amen.