Sermon Epiphany 2, 17 Jan 21

Here we are still in the season of epiphany, the season in which we remember and reflect on the revealing of Jesus Christ to the world. Last week we had John the Baptist, and the wonderful Trinitarian introduction to Jesus‘s ministry, this week we have a story of the calling of the prophet Samuel, and the first disciples of Jesus. So much in both of these lovely stories.

Firstly to give you some context for the calling of Samuel. This was a time in the history of the nation of Israel, when they had had a series of Judges, people who God had called to lead the nation. There had been no continuity, indeed some of them had been quite surprising. Think of long-haired irresponsible Samson, cautious Gideon, gallant Deborah - if you want some blood and gore and like to see women in the forefront of things then read the story of Jael and the tent peg.

Judges, people who had led the nation of Israel. But now things were going to change. Samuel, born of a barren woman, had been dedicated to God from his birth. He was brought up by Eli the priest in a time when the word of God was rarely heard and yet we have this wonderful story of God calling him. I think it is beautiful. This young boy, so faithful, so trusting, so open, so obedient - such a contrast to Eli who had failed in his duties as high priest.

God chooses Samuel, and the calling is a microcosm of his future life long calling as a prophet. Firstly he was called to listen, listen to God, and be aware of what was happening around him. Then he was called to declare what was present and known, namely that Eli was failing in his duties. A simple thing to speak out, and yet so often the truth is ignored and covered, indeed is buried beneath half-truths and brashly declared lies, often by those in authority. We have seen this in Trump’s presidency and it is now being called out, being named for what it is. We have seen it in the Black Lives matter events of last year, in the school meals saga, in the child poverty of our own nation, the plight of asylum seekers and refugees, the condemnation of the Uighur Muslims in China, the oppression of lower castes in India. So many places where authority is abused, misused. The people who are naming and calling out these injustices are today’s prophets and we are called to add our voices to theirs, pray into the situations where there is injustice, where people are treated unfairly.

Samuel was a prophet called to point out to the Israelite nation where they were failing in their duties and responsibilities to God. He was a remarkable man, who faithfully guided that nation through the appointment of their first three kings, and the beginning of the establishment of the Temple where God was to reign and meet with his chosen people. He was the one solid, reliable person throughout that whole period of Israel’s turbulent history, continually trusting in God, calling out to God, listening to God and obediently speaking out and doing all that God wanted him to say and do.

I wonder how often he thought back to that first calling by God? “Samuel, Samuel.” Did he ever doubt his calling? Did he ever question his calling? Such a faithful prophet, in difficult, changing and challenging times.

Do we know our calling? Do we remain faithful to our calling? Especially in difficult, changing and challenging times?

Nathaniel.

“Nathaniel, Nathaniel you have got to come, we have found him about whom Moses in the law and all the Prophets wrote - Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.”

“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

“Come and see.”

When I was first baptised in the Holy Spirit in Hong Kong in 1985, I was so excited and I wanted everyone to “Come and see”. I wanted everyone else to have the same experience, to also be filled with the same Holy Spirit that had filled me. Sadly I met with a lot of rejection and it was a bruising time, but there after where ever I went, I always found other Christians who had also met with the living Lord Jesus, who similarly had been filled with the Holy Spirit.

“Come and see.”

That is our call to others. Come and see this Lord Jesus who transforms lives, makes people whole, reveals God the Father to us. “Come and see.”

Nathaniel was a faithful devout Jew, in whom there was no guile, no deceit. In him, Jesus met a kindred spirit, someone who longed for God’s presence and action in the world. Such an encouragement to Jesus to have such a kindred spirit with him. Such an encouragement to us to have kindred spirits with us, people who likewise share the experience of God’s presence and action in our lives, God’s Holy Spirit working in and through us.

We need this fellowship particularly at this time of yet another lockdown. We need the encouragement, the prayers, the support of kindred Spirits - we need each other.

We need to be both prophets and Spirit led disciples. Prophets in listening to God, responding and acting. Spirit led disciples in focussing on being with Jesus and living in the fullness of his love and promises. So how can we do this? I suggest we combine the two.

This week, set aside time to speak to God and ask him simple questions. Jesus is there anyone you would like me to telephone today? Is there anything in particular you want me to say to them? How special they are to you? How much you love them? ...Is there any action you would like me to do this week? A thank you card to someone? The gift of a flower? Anything Lord that will lift someone’s heart and soul to you, that will point them to you, draw them closer to you.

Several members of our churches are already doing this and in this last week we have been making more of an effort to contact those on the periphery, to let them know they are much loved and not forgotten. Be part of this, the family of God, listening to God, responding with love and faithfulness, reaching out to others, being a prophet to them and encouraging them to “Come and see.”

Amen.

Graham Phillips