



# *Second Sunday after Epiphany*

## *Sermon by Revd Margaret Place*



Sunday 17 January 2021

### READINGS

1 Samuel 3: 1-10; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; 1 Corinthians 6: 12-20; John 1: 43-51

## *Called to be fully God's Creation*

May I speak in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Welcome again to our online service. I'm sorry that our services are closed again, but let's be grateful we have the weapon of lockdown against the virus, and doubly grateful that we have online technology to keep us in touch with one another. And we pray for those who have lost livelihoods, we pray for the souls of those lost to this pandemic, and the families that mourn them. We also pray that soon, our vaccine issues will be sorted, and our world can be on the road to defeating this scourge of the last year.

Our Old Testament and Gospel readings this week focus on God calling people to his service. We have that familiar story of young Samuel, a much wanted baby who was given wholly to God by his grateful mother and now lives at the holy place with Eli. Samuel, who until this point had never heard God for himself, hears the call in the middle of the night, and thinks it's Eli, but Eli ultimately realises it is God, instructs Samuel accordingly and Samuel answers God directly the next time God calls. God calls Samuel to be the next judge/prophet, and his first task is to give his mentor, Eli, the uncomfortable news that Eli is condemned for his non-action, and his sons are condemned for their wickedness, and Samuel is to be the deliverer of God's word to the people. Nothing like going in at the deep end for a newly hatched prophet.

We also have that story of Nathaniel in the Gospel. Note there are two disciples called. Philip, whom Jesus calls directly, and he follows immediately. Philip calls on his friend, Nathaniel, to come and meet the One, and Nathaniel opens his big mouth and passes an opinion about Jesus' origins. Jesus handles Nathaniel differently. He affirms him – Nathaniel is a man who is straight. He speaks the truth. But Nathaniel is also impressed both by Jesus' insight into him, and the promise that he will see more. Two different men, and Jesus wants them both, and he calls each one using words their personalities respond to.

The other two readings, Psalm 139 and Paul's letter to the Corinthians have a slightly different focus. The psalm is that wonderful description of how God is so intimately involved in our creation. In modern language, God chooses the DNA which goes into our makeup, and is intimately involved in those people

whom he has created. We can recognize that we are “fearfully and wonderfully made” by a God who will be with us everywhere.

There is nowhere we can escape from this God who loves us so much .

St Paul is probably talking to his Jewish/Christian followers in Corinth where they are part of a culture where sexuality and its expression is part of it. It seems that a young man’s initiation was complete when he had had intercourse with a prostitute after the final party. Paul is not only decrying that on moral grounds – that sexual intercourse is a joining of two human beings, one to the other rather than just the fulfilling of physical needs, but he also points out that our identity is within Christ, and we don’t need other such liaisons to define us. Our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit and who and what we are represents the presence of God in the world, so we respect ourselves and our bodies accordingly.

So how do we relate these two themes- that of our integrity as those human beings created by God and recreated into Christ, and the fact that God calls people to do special work for the good of God’s world?

Today’s scriptures speak more particularly about people being called to serve God in what could loosely be called religious ministry, and we all still speak of clergy as being “called” in this way. But I think that all careers or activities that give life meaning and contribute to society are callings and are as much initiated by God as the religious one. I have known lawyers passionate about justice, accountants who loved figures – and one I knew was a forensic accountant and she was fascinated by how the evildoers structured the accounts to get away with their fraud. I know too of a cleaning lady who did far more than was required because she said she was called to keep things clean, and her life’s work was to make “her boss” happy in his work by making his office comfortable. (Let’s be clear about this - she owned the boss, she didn’t work for him). Everything we do is, to some extent, a calling, and there are many who serve others, not only for what they can get out of it, but because they are strongly motivated by a calling to do good. Such a calling from God works within what is best for human beings.

While a calling to the priesthood is overtly acknowledged as an integral part of the vocation, I think every Christian is called by God and often a calling from God goes beyond a drive to use our abilities for the betterment of others. Like Samuel, we as Christians are called upon to be the voice of criticism and prophecy, or we may be called to do what is beyond us in the ordinary course of events, like many of our nursing staff are at the moment, whose simple prayers are the only last rites heard by dying patients in our Covid wards.

We acknowledge, therefore, that God made us right from the start. God fashioned us with our physical appearance (even if we wonder why he gave us our grandfather’s awful nose) and gave us the abilities, varying levels of skill and intellect, to earn our living and this God delights in our love of certain kinds of music, forays into nature, achievement in sport, and our pride in those flowers that only we can make grow in our climate. And if society is well regulated, everyone supports everyone else, and peace and harmony reign. But God may well call us to do more. Many people have found themselves in a crisis wondering how they coped, and then on looking back, they saw that God was with them all the time.

But what happens when something like a pandemic hits, and everything is thrown into confusion? I think it’s fair to say that all leaders everywhere were caught on the back foot with this, and much administration

and management has seen people scrambling to make sense of it all and to create rules to organise and accommodate what no one fully understands. As do earthquakes and tsunamis and Spring tides and fierce hailstorms and wildfires do, this has stripped away the façade of our world, it has left us with its inadequacies bare, exposed and there for all to see. The whole world has seen the suffering, some from Covid, much from unpreparedness and mismanagement and politicking and greed and even more from the gross inadequacies of our social structures which have been hidden by the generosity of many and the quiet uncomplaining endurance of the unfortunate during more peaceful and less demanding times. In this set of circumstances, the ordinary, everyday people are called upon to be the heroes, and many are providing out of their little for those who need help the most and are far away from getting it. God is never more present than when we are struggling, even though at the time we feel as though we are floundering and grasping whatever is nearest. Somehow, we are hearing a calling we don't even recognize as such a thing.

And when the storm is over, and we venture out from behind our masks and we look in the cold light of day to see what damage has been done and what needs to be repaired, we will be called by God in a new way. We will be called to use the creative mind that God has given to develop new ways to live so that such disasters, which, we have been assured, will happen again, will never be allowed to take such a toll on all life again. We will be called to mourn those fearfully and wonderfully made people who will now never be able to express their calling, and we are also called to ensure that their loss of life was not in vain. And we may even be called upon to be the prophetic voice that says "thus says the Lord" to authority and to call failed leadership to account.

When Jesus called his disciples, they had to leave everything behind and follow him. If we are going to follow any calling in the present time, we will be required to put aside habits, ambitions and ideologies which have shaped us in the past, and to step out of them, as we would step out of broken burnt clothing after fighting a fire, and look to camp in a desert until we can hear the calling of God which will lead us into a Promised Land where everyone will hear God's voice, and all will be able to say unreservedly, "speak, Lord, your servant is listening." And we can then look towards heaven on earth, where we are all one in Christ, and no one prostitutes themselves for the plastic junk of image, status, greed and personal comfort all at the expense of others, and no one is prostituted by the oppression of deprivation and raw need. They too will be allowed to hear the call of God, and everyone, the gifted, the skilled and the ordinary workers, will fulfil the destiny planned for them when God made them and called them and God will be fully glorified, and God's creation will, reborn and made new, once again, be very good.