

## ***'Lord, you have searched me out and known me'***

*A sermon prepared by The Revd Viv Bridges for an online service celebrating the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Epiphany, 17 January 2021, recorded in All Saints' Wytham. Ref: 1 Samuel 3: 1-10*

During Epiphany we look at the way in which God reveals himself to his people, to the world. Today our readings are about how he reveals himself to us as individuals, how he 'calls' us.

The Old Testament reading is a very clear example of God calling Samuel to be his servant – truly 'calling'. Samuel heard God's call three times. He himself didn't understand what it meant, he thought it was Eli calling to him. Samuel found out the meaning of the voices from someone else.

The example of 'calling' we have from the Gospel is similar in one way. God, through Jesus, spoke directly to the people he was calling. Unlike Samuel, Phillip and Nathaniel knew directly what this call meant. They didn't need anyone to interpret Jesus' words. Nathaniel may not have believed Jesus was anyone special at first, but he still went on to answer his direct call.

We're told in Samuel that *'the word of the Lord was precious in those days; there was no open vision'*. So it was unusual for God to call anyone quite so directly. The word of the Lord and visions are even less common today, so it's even less likely that any of us will hear God's actual voice. If people do hear voices we tend to think they are mentally unstable. So trying to discern what God is calling us to is far more difficult. But we may hear 'messages' or hints in many different ways.

Many people feel called to God through the wonders of creation, through the natural world all around us. This has been particularly important in these past months. Some people feel called to God through the example of the people around them. They see the love that a deep faith in God and obedience to his will can bring about and feel called to try to follow that path. Many people feel called through the words they read. Sometimes words in a Spiritual book or the Bible can seem to speak very directly to us. In his book 'Meditations on a Theme' Anthony Bloom says, *"Those words which make our hearts burn within us are spoken to us directly."*

Words from many books have moved me and drawn me. And probably none greater than the psalm that is set for this morning's Common Worship Holy communion, Psalm 139. Just a few verses from it:

*"O Lord, thou hast searched me out, and known me: thou knowest my down-sitting, and mine up-rising; thou understandest my thoughts long before. Thou art about my path, and about my bed and spiest out all my ways. For lo, there is not a word in my tongue but thou, O Lord, knowest it altogether. Thou hast fashioned me behind and before and laid thine hand upon me."*

and later ...

*"Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being imperfect and in thy book were all my members written; Which day by day were fashioned when as yet there was none of them."*

I suspect that psalm 139 has moved many people to a deeper relationship with God and I remember vividly one evening many years ago. As you may know, I have always had a deep faith and commitment, but because of having two children close together, prayer and time alone with God had rather gone by the board. For some reason, (probably something to do with the Holy Spirit!!) I decided to say Compline again – something that I always used to do kneeling by my bed last thing at night. The psalm was 139 and the effect was extraordinary. It's difficult to put this into words, but it was a physical sensation. My stomach and heart 'leapt' and it seemed as if the words were God striking directly into my soul. *'Lord, you have searched me out and known me'*.

God had searched me out – he knew me from the inside to the outside. The result of this was the amazing realisation that, whatever I am or do, God knows me. I can't keep anything from him, I can't 'hide' anything. I don't really have to tell him anything or explain anything. He knows the good bits – the bits I would like him to know – but he also knows the bad bits. And he has known them for ever!

And yet, and yet, he loves me. He has always loved me, in spite of those bits I didn't want him to know about. There is nothing within me that he doesn't know about or that stops him from loving me. So there is nothing that I need to hide from him.

What a most extraordinary thing to come to know. What revelation, what liberation! So – I certainly felt that in that moment God was calling me: not to 'go out', rather at that moment he was calling me to deepen my relationship with him. To go back to spending time with him as I had done before being preoccupied with the children. He was calling me – totally as I am – warts and all.

God wanted me to open up to his 'searching out and knowing'. Not for him to find out anything new – he knew me from the beginning 'from my mother's womb' – but so that I could find out about myself. Because God's 'searching' shines a light into our souls and hearts, illuminating it for us to see if we dare. But we don't need to be afraid. Whatever we see, good or bad, has been known by God from the beginning and he still loves me. There will be many things I need to say sorry for, but there is nothing I need to try to hide or be afraid of.

One of the other passages that moves me greatly is in Mirabai Starr's introduction to her translation of St Teresa's 'Interior Castle' (which I find rather hard going!). She gives this introduction the title 'The Calling' and in it she suggests many of the ways in which God calls us:

*"Listen softly, the one you love is calling. Listen. At first you will only hear traces of his voice. Love letters he drops for you in hiding places. In the sound of a baby laughing, in a boyfriend telling you a dream, in a book about loving kindness, in the sun dipping down below the horizon and a peacock's tail of purple and orange clouds unfolding behind it...."* and so on.

She calls us to listen, and if we do '*his voice will come closer*'

God calls us all. It may well be very difficult to figure out what he wants us to do, so the first thing we have to do is listen. Listen out for those messages – in nature, in the face of others, in words in a book, in the many different ways that we can deepen our relationship with him. And he calls us from within our own being, the being that he has 'SEARCHED OUT AND KNOWN'. He calls us to respond to him without fear. There is nothing to be afraid or ashamed of because he loves us, totally and unconditionally.

From Mirabai Starr again:

*"Be brave and walk through the country of your own wild heart. Be still. Listen. Believe the incredible truth that the Beloved has chosen for his dwelling place the core of your own being because that is the single most beautiful place in all of creation. Waste no time. Enter the centre of your soul."*

Amen