

# The God Who Calls

Mike's final talk at Holy Trinity Twickenham, 2 August 2009. 1 Samuel 3:2-10.

I think the first story I ever remember being told was this story, about a young boy called Samuel receiving a strange call from God in the middle of the night.

It seems odd to say that today. We live in an era where there's almost complete illiteracy when it comes to the stories of the Bible. Most people have heard of a few of the best known stories of the Bible, like Noah's ark and the Christmas story. Beyond that, there's almost total ignorance about the key people and events and themes of Scripture. Including this story.

So here's a little bit of background. The story's set a bit before 1,000 BC. Somewhere around 1075 BC, just before the time of King David. Samuel was the first of the great prophets of Israel and he was born after repeated prayers to God by his mother Hannah, who'd struggled for years to conceive.

When she eventually had a son, she was so grateful to God that she dedicated him to God's service. So when Samuel was a young boy she took him to be educated by an old man called Eli, who was high priest at the time. And that meant living in the Temple compound at a place called Shiloh, a bit like a spiritual boarding school.

The story happens as the young Samuel is asleep in his bed, close to the heart of this Temple complex. And he's awoken from sleep by a voice calling his name. So he gets up and runs to Eli to ask what he wants. And Eli rolls over, and says he didn't call him, and tells him to go back to bed. And this happens three times. The third time, Eli realizes that something special is happening: it must be God who's speaking to Samuel.

Don't get the impression this happens all the time in the Bible. It doesn't. In fact, at the start of this chapter it explicitly says: 'In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions'. So Eli wasn't expecting this any more than most of us would. And young Samuel certainly wasn't expecting it. He has no categories for the idea of God speaking to a person, which is why he assumes it must be Eli.

But Eli advises Samuel to go back and ask God what he wants to say. Which he does. And what he hears is a shocking and controversial message from God about the future of Eli's family and the spiritual leadership of the nation. And Samuel receives a special call from God to be a prophet.

God is a God who calls people to particular tasks. He did it 3,000 years ago, in the middle of the night in a place called Shiloh. God still calls people to particular tasks today. God doesn't often call people with an audible voice the way he called young Samuel that night. More often, we encounter the voice of God as we read the Bible or through a strong sense of conviction as we pray. Sometimes we can hear a challenge from God in church or through another person. But God is still the God who calls people.

For each of us, God has two callings:

**a) The first** is the general call to follow him. It's a call to faith and trust. And that's a call to all people everywhere. Don't be put off by people in our society who're sceptical about faith and say you can't be a thinking person and believe in God any more. It's simply not true. Many of the brightest people in our culture have a strong faith in God. The Christian faith is growing and expanding faster worldwide than at any time in history.

So our first call is that God calls each of us to a relationship of faith and trust in him.

**b) The second** call builds on the top of the first. It's a more specific call to you and me personally. It's a call to a job or a task that only you can fulfill. It may be your paid work, or it may be something you do in your spare time. It may be more about the relationships you're a part of. But God calls you and me to a specific calling that only we can fulfill.

And that's the reason this is my last Sunday here at Holy Trinity. I've now been vicar here for nearly 9 years. I was doing a calculation the other day, and I realize that in those 9 years, I've done more than 300 baptisms, and over 1,000 sermons and talks! When the Bishop of Kensington invited me to look around the parish, we had a very strong sense of God's call to be here.

Of course, if you have a call from God, that doesn't automatically mean it's going to be easy. And for the first few years especially it was a real rollercoaster ride, especially when some people in the church didn't like the idea of change. But the thing that kept me on track through some difficult times was that overwhelming sense of call from God to be here and to see through what he'd called me here to do.

And now we have an equally strong sense that God's calling me on to a new job south of the river, in Kennington, and that he's calling Holy Trinity to enter a whole new phase of its life. We're excited about the future and sad to be leaving, all at the same time.

But the challenge from today's service is not primarily to do with me and my calling. It's about you and your calling. God still calls people, as he called young Samuel three millennia ago. And God has that two-fold calling on your life too:

- a) **To a relationship** of faith and trust in him. Have you put your faith and trust in God? Is that what energizes and motivates you? Because at the end of the day, that's the single most important decision any of us will ever make. Because that underlies everything else: our values, our priorities, our lifestyle.
- b) **To discover the unique calling** that God has given you and nobody else. What is it that you were put on this earth to do or be? Don't allow your life to end without having discovered what you were put here for in the first place.