

How we are called

J Shannon

Let's put it in context – the lectionary so far

Last week, Jesus was baptised by John the Baptist and through this week, while you haven't been paying attention, he has been gathering disciples: Andrew and Simon-Peter. Today he calls Phillip and Nathaniel, as God called Samuel. Next week we get onto the hard work of making some miracles.

In another story, (not in this week's lectionary) Jesus walks beside the Sea and sees two fishermen. He calls, they drop their nets and follow. It's that easy.

God wakes Samuel in the night and tells him something no one else knows – and Samuel is his forever. What kind of call is that?

Jesus finds Phillip and says, 'follow me' – and that's it. Hardly a seduction - no foreplay – no explanation. So Phillip goes to Nathaniel and says, I have found the One. Sceptical Nat says 'huh, can anything good come from Nazareth?' (and at this point you could insert, Birmingham, Slough, or Tasmania depending on your prejudices) But then Jesus does the Samuel thing and tells him something no one else knows. AND recognises him as a good and honest person. Bam. Nat's a convert, that easy.

Or not.

Behind each call is uncertainty, doubt and often pain. Poor Sam was nothing but a slave a slave to look after ailing Eli. His mother gave him to the temple when he was just weaned. After that, he saw his mother once a year. Samuel did all the jobs Eli's no-good sons would not.

God wakes the boy (who did not know the Lord) and tells him he is anointed. and that Eli's family entitlements to the priesthood would die with Eli's death. Think of Eli's sons as Donald junior with a guaranteed income and no need to look for a job. Gone. Eli was a faithful servant and God is punishing him for not being a good father. The end of the line of inherited entitlement.

If you were Sam – would you want to tell the boss what God just told you? Eli insists and even threatens him and so Sam tells him everything. Eli, as a faithful servant, says, it is God's will. However, I am assuming life was not easy between them for the rest of Eli's life.

Sam 'grew up and the Lord was with him' because he had called him.
And Samuel became the spokesperson for the Lord. His honesty renown.

How sad to have grown up in a temple with no family or hugs. What choice did he have? Did he dream of another career? Did he hope he would be free after Eli died?

As for our fishermen– no one mentions that Jesus took the two sons from an elderly man who relied on them for his livelihood and to care for him in his old age. What a hard decision to leave what they knew was their obligation and their destiny to follow another.

We know little about Phillip and Nathaniel or even Andrew for that matter. We know they came from Cana and Bethsaida and that some were followers of John the Baptist. The fact that we know so little about them has been one of my key messages over the last few weeks – just in case you missed it – THEY WERE ORDINARY MEN. There wasn't much to know. They weren't famous. They weren't giants in the community. Unlike Samuel, we don't know how faithful or religious they were before they met Jesus. As we learn as we go through the stories, they didn't necessarily have to be GOOD. They had to have heart – and be open to faith...faith beyond what they had been taught. A bigger faith than religion.

So what is the power – beyond 'follow me...' ?

'I saw you under the fig tree' is an equal statement to 'I knew you in the womb' and the same as Jesus telling the Samaritan woman her life story. It is more than a come-on line – it is meeting and acknowledging a god who *knows* you – all of you, the good and the bad and sees something worthy.

I know a little about calling – I am a reluctant call-ee. I grew up in a liberal family that saw theology as another branch of philosophy: Interesting and well worth studying. My father gave me papers to read from learned Unitarians and Congregationalists. Liberal free thinkers – not what I heard in churches. (Remember I grew up in a time where Proddies threw stones at Catholic kids and everyone beat up the Jews.)

We were not regular church or synagogue goers. Only high holidays and it didn't take me long to realise that was for status – to be seen -not particularly for worship. You had to be seen. My grandfather had a deep faith – which he

didn't share. He walked to synagogue every Saturday morning, rain or shine – alone. It was personal. My Auntie had a faith that made her look at everyone with disapproval. And my nanny who was black and totally engaged with her God every moment of every day. I wasn't sure he was the God of white children as he never seemed to say so.

When I was 15, I was part of the Tel Aviv Guitar club and one of the things we did was roster to entertain remote communities and military bases. This was immediately following the 6-day war and it wasn't safe out there on the borders. I took the train to Haifa, picked up a bus to a little town where a military truck turfed me in the back for the drive to the Galil – the mountains between Israel and Syria. The truck dropped me off on the dusty track and told me a half-track (armoured vehicle) would be along to pick me up. I stood there on the bare hill as the truck disappeared. There were no trees. A few bushes scattered across acres of land that was the same grey colour as the sky. The remnants of a village were silhouetted against the horizon: a wall, a chimney. – I had no idea whether it was 1000 years old or a recent relic of war. Not a soul, not a sound – but the wind, Ruhah. The breath of God. And I knew I was not alone.

Like Samuel – I knew from that minute, God was with me and I never doubted it. I had no idea what it meant or what I was supposed to do – so I got on with life. I went to churches, any, many churches and I had deep conversations with nuns, priests and rabbis: Greek orthodox, Armenian, Roman Catholic, Jewish reformed and orthodox. But nothing happened. I did not feel like I could sign my name to anything as I did not believe in *all* of it. I could not in blind faith, put my hand on my heart (or the Bible) and swear I believed every word. If I couldn't give 100% then I couldn't give. I was a person of pure heart and unreasonable standards.

Later I met some amazing theologians. I started reading. It was obvious from the day of Union (1977) that the Uniting Church would be my home *because* of the way it was formed, *because* of the basis of Union that recognised growth, learning and change. Because it saw justice as worship. But starting to go to church was like going to AA. It was something I *had* to do but it was so hard. It took me months to build up the courage.

What seemed like 100 years (but was really only 40) and someone saw in me what Jesus saw in Nathaniel. Something even I could not see and he coaxed me into chaplaincy because my ordinariness, my scepticism and curiosity were

exactly the gifts that patients needed when they were questioning everything they believed in – even their own bodies. I had no answers – just the willingness to explore with them as part of both our journeys. I was drawn deeper into the forest. Like Phillip on the side of the road, the patients taught me what I needed to know by asking questions.

I went to theological college to learn about the Bible and in studying history and context, my faith grew deeper – not shallower.

And through that – the call. Uncomfortable. Challenging. I have no priestly ambitions. I had no pedigree.

I already had a job and status. I had a persona I had constructed that hid my true beliefs from my friends and my family. I did not want to be exposed and vulnerable. I didn't want to have to explain my faith. I fought, I cried, I railed at God and He persisted.

The hardest part was coming out to my family – who at first treated me like a traitor or a fool under a spell. Some friends are still shaking their heads. Some of my colleagues thought I was mad, others shed tears of joy.

I resigned from Boards and the University and began to close my business down. I entered my candidacy, learning with people literally ½ my age who knew a lot more than me. Many of them 2-3rd generation ministers.

I am not perfect enough but absolutely perfect enough for God's purpose.

And that is my point. The call is not easy. It can be ignored. And it doesn't have to be on a grand scale (resigning from work) – it can be a whisper, when you are in the grocery store queue and the one before you is short of cash, or when you see the thirst on a buskers face and a cool drink is but a few steps away. When you walk past the same person on a bench every day and you stop (or don't stop) to ask them their story. The call is with us all the time. The voice that says pick up someone else's rubbish and take it home. Pick up a phone and ask someone how they're going.

You don't have to be perfect. You don't have to believe everything. You only have to listen because God speaks through ordinary people. He made us, and each one is perfect for the job. Amen.