

**Sunday 14th January 2024**

**The Second Sunday After Epiphany**

**The Revd Dr Janet Tollington**

**Call to Worship**

Come! Let us celebrate that Christ has come into our world and that God is with us –

all of us, wherever we are this day.

Let us lift our hearts and voices in praise as we rejoice together.

Let us draw near to God with the concerns that are weighing us down.

Come! Let us worship God.

**Prayer**

Holy God, Creator of all that is,

we gather to praise and thank you for the wonders of the cosmos,

for the world in which we live, for life itself;

and for your trust in us, humanity, to act as stewards of this fragile earth.

We praise and thank you that you have come amongst us, in Jesus,

to reveal your purposes and ways of love.

In him you have shown us how it is possible to be fully human

and to live according to your commands.

We praise and thank you that through the outpouring of your Spirit

you are active not only in all those who have opened their hearts to receive you;

but also in the darkest places on earth.

Nowhere is beyond your reach, nor excluded from your blessings.

 We come in adoration of you, O God, and also in humble confession.

We confess that we have failed to live up to our calling as your people, to your trust in us. We have failed to recognise the intricate connectedness of all

that you have brought into being;

we have put in jeopardy the very eco-system essential for all live, including our own.

We have failed to love our neighbours,

all those for whom Jesus died that they might have life.

We have turned away from your demands to make peace and establish justice.

We have abdicated our responsibilities to act as stewards and to live as disciples of Christ, preferring instead, all too often, to lift the problems to you

and to continue on the paths that lead to destruction.

 Forgive us, gracious God, for our foolishness and for all our failings.

Have mercy on us and renew us through the love of Christ.

Invigorate us by your Spirit and lead us out to participate in your eternal work

of establishing the kingdom of heaven on earth. Amen.

**Words of Assurance**

 ‘Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners’

 Hear the word of grace and receive the assurance of pardon.

 Your sins are forgiven, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Saviour.

**The Lord’s Prayer**

**Prayer of Illumination**

Eternal God,

you have revealed your nature and purposes through the scriptures and in Jesus Christ,

the incarnate Word.

Open our hearts and minds by the activity of your Spirit, to hear you speaking,

that we may learn more of you and discover afresh your call on our lives. Amen

**Readings**

 *1 Samuel 3:1-10* | St John 1:43-51

**All Age Activity**

Ask how folk know whose voice is whose….dogs can recognise a huge variety of sounds, ignoring, for example, cars that go past until they recognise the car of those they live with coming home when they’ll get company, a walk and food. Sheep recognise the cry of lambs, seals recognise, even when swimming with loads of others, the cry of their young. Birds recognise the call of their mate and their young. In our reading today we read of Samuel struggling to recognise God’s voice but, with Eli’s encouragement, he learns to recognise God’s call. Just as, when we we young, we recognised the voices of those close to us so we can learn to recognise God’s voice – within us, within the Bible, within the Church and, as we learn to hear it we can learn to follow wherever we are called.

**Sermon Notes**

*I Samuel*

The story of the boy Samuel’s call may be familiar but its literary context sets it at the transition point from what’s known as the age of the Judges in Israel’s early history, to that of the monarchy. In the story Eli, a priest, is serving the altar at the Shiloh sanctuary where the Ark of God – the box that symbolised God’s presence with Israel – was being housed. Straightaway we have a question to ponder – who determines where God is present? God, or the people who choose where to house the Ark and when and where it needs to be moved? It is God who determines; but there’s a danger that when we identify God’s presence with any specific location or physical object we are tending to suggest that we as humans have control of this!

In the story Eli is nearing the end of his life and in the previous chapter we’ve learned that his sons are corrupt and under divine judgment. Eli knows that he represents the end of the line! Samuel, dedicated to God by Hannah has been given as an assistant to Eli.

Samuel hears his name – is he dreaming? Is it a real auditory experience? Who might be calling? How can he discern where the voice or his experience has originated? Is it all in his imagination? Clearly Eli has no thought that God might call Samuel, or himself, for any reason. We’ve been told that Eli’s eyes were growing dim; are we also been told that his faith, his expectancy that God might appear or be at work in his life were also diminishing? Was he going through the motions of being a priest with no idea and little hope of what would happen when he died? Would anyone succeed him, might the sanctuary fall into disuse or decay? I wonder, does this picture of Eli’s decline resonate with your situation, or the experience of any of our churches today?

God makes a fourth attempt to communicate with Samuel and this time we’re told that God appears beside the Ark as well as calling his name. God is wanting to open Samuel’s eyes, as well as his ears, to discern God’s presence; and this time the boy’s response marks the start of a personal relationship.

The following verses contain the message Samuel was to convey to Eli about the divine punishment that was coming. A new political and religious era was coming into being through a young boy, who was enabled to discern God entering into his life and urged to respond positively to the call, even though it would often be hard.

Before we move on to our gospel passage its worth noticing that there is a theme of knowing and being known in this story alongside that of discerning. Eli knew the name of God, he eventually passes it on to Samuel to use; but Eli seems to have little real knowledge of God in a personal sense. There is no indication that a mutual relationship exists. God, on the other hand, knows Eli and all about him and his situation; and has determined how his priestly ministry will come to an end. God also knows Samuel, his name, his potential, his inner character; and God reaches out persistently, in more than one way until this divine revelation is recognised, intellectually by Eli, and personally by Samuel in a way that prompts his response. God knows the people involved and God is the one who discerns the time, the place, and the method of revelation that will ultimately accomplish the divine purpose. God doesn’t give up until the chosen person’s heart and mind become receptive and are stirred to respond. I wonder, might God desire to inaugurate a new age in the life of the church? Are we alert to the possibility that God might be seeking to reveal the divine nature and purposes through a new Samuel – a new generation as yet unchurched? Have we the faith and the humility to live expectantly, trying to discern any new direction God may be taking - with a willingness to encourage others to begin a relationship with God by sharing the name of Jesus, and what we know of him, with them as the starting point, no matter what the consequences might be for us or the status quo of church life?

*St John*

The idea of introducing someone to Jesus is prominent in our gospel passage, as are the ideas about seeing, hearing, discerning - and knowing – that we have been considering. The passage continues John’s account of the first disciples who followed Jesus. The setting is Galilee and Philip, perhaps of Greek background, is invited to follow (along with Andrew and Simon Peter). Philip then goes to tell his friend Nathanael and he speaks of Jesus as the one who had been promised by God in the scriptures (the law and the prophets) but also as an ordinary human being from the nearby town of Nazareth. Nathanael’s immediate reaction is dismissive. This is pure prejudice based on some pre-conceived idea that a person’s hometown tells Nathanael all he needs to know about a person, even before he sets eyes on him! Clearly this is ridiculous; yet I wonder do we allow a person’s origins, their ethnicity, race, colour etc, or any other label we attach to a group with which someone identifies, to pre-determine how we regard an individual. Might we be guilty of doing this, even at a subconscious level, in some of the ways we think and speak? Any prejudice can never be justified, everyone deserves a hearing and to be judged on their own merits.

Jesus’ words, as Nathanael approaches, reveal his deep insight into Nathanael as a man, into his inner character; and that he was able to ‘see’ what he’d been doing before he came into sight. Nathanael realises that this level of knowledge and discernment is extraordinary and beyond human ability; and he immediately responds to Jesus declaring him to be the Son of God and King of Israel, titles that identify him as the Messiah. His encounter with Jesus has transformed Nathanael from a prejudiced sceptic into a witness to him as being from God. Jesus adds that Nathanael will discern even greater truths about who he is if he becomes a disciple, referring to the story of Jacob’s ladder (Genesis 28) where the founding ancestor of Israel became aware of God’s presence with him. And Jesus claims for himself the title Son of Man, another clear Messianic idea drawn from the book of Daniel, that links with an emphasis in John’s gospel that Jesus is both human and divine – God incarnate, God revealed in human form

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The story of Nathanael sets before us the truth about Jesus as the one who embodied the revelation of God’s full nature and purposes, the one able to totally transform someone else’s life when they came face to face, the one who calls each of us to follow and thereby discover fullness of life. May we respond like Nathanael and also follow the example of Philip by going out and inviting others to ‘come and see’ and pointing them to Jesus that through him they may welcome God into their lives. Amen

The Offering

Bountiful God, we pause to acknowledge that all that we have is ours

through your generous love and we are truly thankful.

In gratitude we respond by dedicating our offerings to you.

Offerings of money for the work of your Church

and in support of humanitarian causes that further your purposes where need is great.

Offerings of our physical resources, our time, our intellects; our whole selves.

Accept what we offer, bless it; and guide us

so that all is used to build your kingdom, in the name of Jesus, Amen.

Intercessions

God of love, we bring to you our concerns about the people and situations

that are on our hearts and in our minds this day.

 In a world of darkness we pray that your light might shine to bring signs of hope

and to reveal new pathways that lead towards justice, peace, and life in its fulness, especially in the places where conflicts rage, or the consequences of natural disasters

have undermined communities.

In silence we lift before you the places that have been in the media this week and all the people caught up in the situation – be they victims, aggressors, mediators, humanitarian aid workers, or those with power to change the course of events, or to rebuild.

*(Pause)*

Loving God: **By your Spirit bring transformation, that your light may shine more brightly**.

 We pray for the Church in all its various forms of expression across the world

and the church in which we each find our spiritual home.

May all who are members of Christ’s body hear again the call to follow

and to serve you faithfully.

Renew us by your love that your Church may be encouraged and invigorated.

 Inspire us to deeper love for one another and enable us to see

where we might work together more effectively as partners in mission

furthering your purposes.

(*Pause*)

Loving God: **By your Spirit bring transformation, that your light may shine more brightly**.

 We pray for ourselves and our friends and family,

all those with whom we share our daily lives.

May your love in us strengthen our relationships and enable us to be as Christ to any who are in need of healing, consolation, or support of any kind.

May we, also, be open to receive your love coming to us from others

to meet our personal needs.

 In silence we name those known to us in need of particular blessing;

and we present our own needs too.

(*Pause*)

Loving God: **By your Spirit bring transformation, that your light may shine more brightly**.

 We bring all these prayers in the name of Jesus, Amen.

Blessing

Let us go in peace and joy in the service of God, to share the love of Christ.

And may the blessing of God Almighty, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer

be with you all, now and always. Amen

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| **Hymn Suggestions** |
|  | RS | CH4 | StF | MP |
| O God, you search me and you know me (Psalm 139) |  | 97 | 728 |  |
| Worship the Lord in the Beauty of Holiness | 187 | 201 | 34 | 529 |
| Before the World Began | 180 | 317 | 101 |  |
| Will you come and follow me | 558 | 533 | 673 |  |
| I, the Lord of sea and sky |  | 251 | 633 | 857 |
| Let earth and heaven combine | 190 |  | 208 |  |
| Songs of Thankfulness and Praise | 191 |  |  |  |
| The Silent Stars Shine Down On Us |  |  | 231 |  |

RS – *Rejoice & Sing* | CH4 – *Church Hymnary 4* | StF – *Singing the Faith* | MP – *Mission Praise*