

Second Sunday after Epiphany

Sermon Text – John 1:43-51

Theme: Called by God

Grace, peace and mercy to you from our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Most people here today have heard our services begin with the affirmation that, “God has called us to shine the light of Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit into the time and place God has placed us”. This statement is not yet our congregation’s mission statement, but it could be. Regardless of whether we adopt this or not, the statement helps us to understand our identity and to provide a focus for what we might do as God’s people in this time and place.

God’s *holy* calling of Samuel, Philip, Nathanael, or indeed any of his people as revealed in the Bible, did not stop when the ink was drying on the final verses of Revelation. God continues to call his people today and we continue to struggle and rejoice in God’s *holy* calling of us to his royal priesthood.

Heavenly Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. Amen.

Move One – What’s in a name

Names are very important to who we are and where we fit into our community. Even in Australia where we are fond of calling everyone on a first name basis, you don’t really belong to the group until you’ve been given a nickname. This can be as simple as adding ‘O’ to the end of your name. Johnno or Simmo are two examples. Of course Darylo would sound silly, so we have Dazza or maybe Shazza for Sharon. Once the name becomes oblique or nonsensical, then you really know your ‘in’. My wife, Sonja, was always puzzled by my best mates, Guerney, Buzz, and I was Bobo.

Names help us to be identified and they also give access to who we are. When I receive letters from the Department of Defence, I’m Captain Ker. When I receive letters from Centrelink, I’m Mr Mathew Ker. When I receive letters from the Lutheran Church, I’m Pastor Mathew Ker. When I receive letters from the wider church, I’m Reverend Mathew Ker. When my sons call me, I’m Dad. When my Sonja calls – that’s not your business! This will be the same for each one of you. Whatever name people call you, says something about the relationship you have with that person.

When God calls people to himself, he uses their name. He called Samuel by name and it was so familiar, Samuel thought it was his mentor, Eli the Priest. When Jesus called Nathanael through Philip, he revealed that he knew him intimately, even before they met face to face. When God calls you, he does so by your name, because he knows *you*. How does God know you? Well he created you, and he has adopted you, through baptism, as his very own child. So precious to God are his children that he says in Isaiah: “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.” (43:1) And, “Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.” (49:16)

Move Two – God seeks us

What God’s Word does primarily is to seek out people to follow him in a close and loving relationship. Those who embrace God’s loving call, then extend that seeking to other people who do not yet know or put their trust in God. The Old Testament and Gospel readings for today share some important lessons about how God seeks his people out. They also provide examples of the fruitful response to God’s call by Samuel, Philip and Nathanael.

In the examples given in today’s readings, the seeking begins with God. Jesus once reminded his disciples that, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit” (Jn 15:16). Samuel, who was still very young and was under something like an apprenticeship to Eli the Priest, was not praying, or studying, or practicing priestly rituals. He wasn’t trying to get God’s attention. Samuel was lying down, trying to get a good night’s rest, when God spoke to him, calling him by name. When God used Philip to call Nathanael, he wasn’t searching for God – he was sitting under the shade of a fig tree. Yet Jesus was the one who saw him and who came to Nathanael.

This is a basic Christian truth; that and seeking for real contact and communion with God always begins with His activity. Whilst this means we might have to let go of some pride about how we ‘found God’, it should really provide us with comfort because it means that God cares enough about each us to have

first reached out toward us. The Catechism teaches that with our enslaved, sinful natures, we were spiritually blind, we were dead, we were enemies of God and therefore unwilling and unable to make any first step toward God. Thank God he has called you by name and that he has come first of all to you.

When God seeks his people out he already knows them intimately. When Jesus saw Nathanael, he said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no guile!" Then to Nathanael's face, Jesus said, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." This isn't just a case of seeing someone across the courtyard. The implication is that Jesus saw the real person in Nathanael, not just the outside person who was resting. When God calls you, he knows the real you. He knows all of the good things that you have done – he also knows all of the bad things that you have done and that you continue to struggle with. This is the true measure of God's love, that in spite of all that we are, he still comes to us, he still calls us by name, he still washes us with his forgiveness of sins.

A third point is that when God calls us, he is persistent. God didn't give up after calling Samuel once or twice. He didn't decide that since Samuel was making a mistake, he wasn't going to bother any more. He didn't think that Samuel was too young, or not yet ready. God repeated himself four times until he got it through to Samuel that it *was* he who wanted Samuel's attention and to make him truly useful.

If God was persistent with Samuel, I am astounded with his persistence with me, and perhaps you might be surprised at his persistence with you! God didn't quit when we ignored his first calls. He wasn't silent once we were baptised. We didn't 'graduate' at Confirmation, no longer needing his presence. But rather, every invitation to worship and every time we receive the means of grace given through His Word and Sacrament, is God's continual seeking after us. He isn't seeking us to 'check up' on us, but rather to bless us and give us the things that we need.

Move Three – God wants a close and personal relationship

Perhaps the most important point about God's seeking out his children is that what he wants for *every* human being, is a close, personal and direct relationship. No longer did the orders and messages reach Samuel indirectly through the priest, Eli. From now on it would be 'up close and personal' between Samuel and the Lord.

To get even closer, God made himself known through the person of Jesus Christ. The invitation to Philip and Nathanael, to follow, is extended to us all. It is much more than just learning about Jesus. What God seeks and intend is our becoming part and parcel with Jesus Christ. He was nailed to a wooden cross, lifted up and died to pay the ransom which releases humanity from the power of sin, death and the devil. Rising from death with power and glory, Jesus has broken sin's death grip on us.

Our worship and Communion, the weekly repetition of Confession and Absolution, Baptismal ceremonies and the renewing of our Baptisms - are NOT mere powerless, meaningless rituals representing something about Jesus. Rather, the doing of the Means of Grace, of Word and Sacrament, is God in Person at work incorporating us into Christ. Jesus' saving death is made ours, as if we were put to death for our sins. His resurrection is the guarantee of ours, and every form in which Calvary's forgiveness is conveyed to us in a granting of the new life already which will be completed in us at our Lord's Final Coming!

Because you have been called and saved by God, you know shine this light for others to see. Just as Philip didn't judge or truly know Nathanael, nor will you truly know those whom God puts you before. But by being Christ to others through your words, and actions, you are serving as God's secret agents in the world. By the power of the Holy Spirit, you are placing God before all people and he will call them by name.

And the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep guard over your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.