Epiphany 2B

**1 Samuel 3: 1-10; Revelation 5: 1-10; John 1: 43-end**

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

There is something in both the Old Testament and gospel readings this morning about discernment, about our calling as Christians, and there are some fantastic stories throughout the Bible of people encountering God. They range from terrifying experiences, like Paul’s on the Damascus Road, to quiet ones, like Elijah hearing God’s ‘still small voice’, and the downright strange story of Jacob wrestling with … whoever it was Jacob wrestled with.

Today, even if you haven’t heard all the readings, do remember that you can catch up using the Bible references in the pew leaflet.

Very often the important question both in Bible times and still for us today is not ‘Is God speaking?’ but ‘Are we ready and willing to listen?’ I will nail my colours firmly to the mast here and say that I believe that God speaks to us all the time: through the Bible, through other people, through - call them what you will - flashes of inspiration, and also through prayer and contemplation - it was Joan of Arc who said: How else would God speak to me, if not through my imagination?

So, the Old Testament reading tells the story of the boy Samuel, old Eli’s assistant, hearing a voice calling his name while he was asleep, and waking up and going to Eli, to ask what he wanted. And Eli kept saying: no, I haven’t called you; go back to bed. Until finally Eli realises who it was who was calling Samuel and tells him that the next time he hears it, he is to answer: Speak, Lord, your servant is listening. As we spend time with God in prayer, however we do it, we need to give God the space to speak, and allow ourselves the space to hear what he might be saying to us.

And then the gospel reading tells a very sweet story of Nathaniel, under the fig tree, who was distinctly sceptical when Philip came along and said: we’ve found the Messiah – he’s the son of Joseph of Nazareth. And Nathaniel answers: Seriously? Does anything worthwhile come from Nazareth? In the same way as I, as a good Geordie lass, might question whether anyone who comes from south of the Tyne counts as a real human being …. ☺

But then all it takes is for Jesus to say to Nathaniel: I saw you and knew you long before you saw me, and suddenly Nathaniel knows for himself that this is the Messiah. He has had his own encounter with God – not to be called to a role, but just to understand that he is known personally and loved by God.

Sadly, somehow, in our increasingly busy and technology-led world, we have lost or forgotten the ability to encourage one another to talk about our experiences of God. How can we enable people to say: actually I have had a profound experience of God which leads me to see things differently for me?

Both Samuel and Nathaniel from today’s readings had an experience of God, and needed help to say what it was – it wasn’t God asking them to do something; it was simply a sign that they were known and recognised by God, as children of God.

But how do we find the space to say that: I think I have had an experience of God. Lesslie Newbegin was a British theologian who died 20 years ago this month, and he put our difficulty in this sphere down to the timidity and anxiety of the western church in general. We dare not speak the name, because we don’t want that which we treasure to be dismissed by others.

Godparents and parents, today, you take on that role for the children in your care - particularly Lucas, whom you bring to baptism today - to encourage him (and indeed any others in your care), by your own words and example, to talk about their experiences of God, and to make it once more, normal to do so.

And so we come in a moment to the baptism of this little boy. Who is being called by God. Not TO something in particular – at least not yet – but who is being recognised as being at the very start of his life as a Christian.

As God spoke at the baptism of Jesus, sending a dove upon Jesus’ head with the words: This is my Son, and I love him, so God is doing the same to Lucas today.

As Samuel heard God during the night hours, we will all be praying today that he might in due course hear God say to him: you are my child, and I love you.

The way we serve others is the greatest testimony to the love of God at work within us. God is constantly speaking, through his word and through the lives of his people. May each of us learn to listen and respond to his call and so become the people that he is calling us to be, through the power of his Holy Spirit.

**Amen**