

14th January 2024 – Morning Service

I hear you calling*

Rev Andrew Roberts

A Gathering Prayer

Speak to us, Lord: help us to hear. Show us your glory, Lord: help us to see. May we taste and sense your presence, Lord: help us to feel. In our time, and in your time, Lord, lead us where you want us to go, and show us what you want us to know. **Amen.**

StF 340 – Ye servants of God

- 1) Ye servants of God, your Master proclaim,
and publish abroad his wonderful name;
the name all-victorious of Jesus extol;
his kingdom is glorious, and rules over all.
- 2) God ruleth on high, almighty to save;
and still he is nigh, his presence we have;
the great congregation his triumph shall sing,
ascribing salvation to Jesus our King.
- 3) 'Salvation to God who sits on the throne!'
Let all cry aloud, and honour the Son;
the praises of Jesus the angels proclaim,
fall down on their faces, and worship the Lamb.
- 4) Then let us adore, and give him his right;
all glory and power, all wisdom and might,
all honour and blessing, with angels above,
and thanks never-ceasing, and infinite love.

Charles Wesley

Prayer of Adoration

God of all knowing and all loving, you fashioned us and know us through and through:

we rejoice at your love and care for us.

Lord Jesus, you know the cries of the world and call us to reach out to those in need:

we thank you for your love and care for us and all those in need.

Holy Spirit, you call us deep within, and empower us to trust the gifts you have equipped us with:

Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we rejoice at your love and care for us and pray for your blessing on those in need this day. Amen.

Prayer of Confession

Dear God, when knowing myself causes me – to doubt that you could ever want me as your disciple:

Forgive me and help me to trust you more deeply.

to doubt that you could ever love me:

Forgive me and help me to trust you more deeply.

to doubt that you could ever accept me:

Forgive me and help me to trust you more deeply.

Thank you that, in forgiving us, you give us fresh energy to serve you, fresh understanding of our calling, fresh wisdom as we share our faith, fresh purpose as we live out that faith day by day, fresh appreciation of the gifts of others, and fresh hope for all that lies ahead. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. **Amen.**

Introduction to Reading (Two voices)

Narrator: Eli is a priest who serves in the Temple. And Samuel is a young boy who helps Eli in the Temple. Samuel will later become an important leader of his people. Let's hear what Eli might have been thinking.

Eli: He's like a son to me, is Samuel. My own sons...well, they're not much help to me. They've lost their way big time. And as for me [*sighs*]... Well, I still fulfil my priestly duties in the Temple. I know the rules, and the way everything should be done. But I've lost the listening ear I once had, the way I could hear and feel what God wanted for me and the people I serve. But Samuel – so young and eager to learn, so willing to listen to my instructions, and so keen to serve God! – maybe, just maybe, God can get through to him and Samuel will hear, will listen. Maybe together we can discover God's plan. I feel sure that Samuel will figure in that somewhere. Perhaps I'll need to step back and listen to Samuel, however hard the message might be.

Reading: 1 Samuel 3:1-20

The boy Samuel ministered before the Lord under Eli. In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions. One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place. The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the house of the Lord, where the ark of God was. Then the Lord called Samuel.

Samuel answered, "Here I am." And he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

But Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down." So he went and lay down.

Again the Lord called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

"My son," Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down."

Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord: The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.

A third time the Lord called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

Then Eli realized that the Lord was calling the boy. So Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

The Lord came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!"

Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

And the Lord said to Samuel: "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears about it tingle. At that time I will carry out against Eli everything I spoke against his family— from beginning to end. For I told him that I would judge his family forever because of the sin he knew about; his sons blasphemed God, and he failed to restrain them. Therefore I swore to the house of Eli, 'The guilt of Eli's house will never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering.'"

Samuel lay down until morning and then opened the doors of the house of the Lord. He was afraid to tell Eli the vision, but Eli called him and said, "Samuel, my son." Samuel answered, "Here I am."

"What was it he said to you?" Eli asked. "Do not hide it from me. May God deal with you, be it ever so severely, if you hide from me anything he told you."

So Samuel told him everything, hiding nothing from him. Then Eli said, "He is the Lord; let him do what is good in his eyes."

The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the Lord.

StF 663 – I the Lord of sea and sky

- 1) I, the Lord of sea and sky,
I have heard my people cry.
All who dwell in dark and sin my hand will save.
I, who made the stars of night,
I will make their darkness bright.
Who will bear my light to them?
Whom shall I send?
- 2) I, the Lord of snow and rain,
I have borne my people's pain;
I have wept for love of them - they turn away.
I will break their hearts of stone,
give them hearts for love alone.
I will speak my word to them.
Whom shall I send?
- Ch) *Here I am, Lord.
Is it I, Lord?
I have heard you calling in the night.
I will go, Lord,
if you lead me.
I will hold your people in my heart.*
- 3) I, the Lord of wind and flame,
I will tend the poor and lame.
I will set a feast for them - my hand will save.
Finest bread I will provide
till their hearts are satisfied.
I will give my life to them.
Whom shall I send?

Daniel L. Schutte © OCP Publications

CCL No. 515642

Reading: John 1:43-51

The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me." Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked. "Come and see," said Philip. When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit." "How do you know me?" Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you." Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel." Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that." He then added, "Very truly I tell you, you will see 'heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on' the Son of Man."

StF 673 – Will you come and follow me

- 1) Will you come and follow me if I but call
your name?
Will you go where you don't know and
never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown,
will you let my name be known,
will you let my life be grown in you and
you in me?
- 2) Will you leave yourself behind if I but call
your name?
Will you care for cruel and kind and never
be the same?
Will you risk the hostile stare
should your life attract or scare?
Will you let me answer prayer in you and
you in me?
- 3) Will you let the blinded see if I but call
your name?
Will you set the prisoners free and never
be the same?
Will you kiss the leper clean,
and do such as this unseen,
and admit to what I mean in you and you in
me?
- 4) Will you love the 'you' you hide if I but call
your name?
Will you quell the fear inside and never
be the same?
Will you use the faith you've found
to reshape the world around,
through my sight and touch and sound in
you and you in me?

- 5) Lord, your summons echoes true when you but call my name.
Let me turn and follow you and never be the same.
In your company I'll go, where your love and footsteps show.
Thus I'll move and live and grow in you and you in me.

John L Bell & Graham Maule © 1987 WGRG Iona Community CCL No. 515642

Sermon

John's account of the calling of the first disciples is very different to the accounts of Mark, Matthew and Luke. John presents the first disciples of Jesus as 'representatives of belief'¹. As such there is much we can learn from the disciples as presented in the fourth Gospel. John also widens the use of the term *mathetes* (the Greek word for disciple) during the course of his Gospel extending the concept of discipleship from a physical following of Jesus and sharing in his mission to a more 'explicitly spiritual connotation [which] facilitates the transition from the disciples of the historical Jesus to later believers'.²

John locates the calling of Jesus' first disciples in the context of them being with John the Baptist. Matthew, Mark and Luke don't make this link in their Gospels although intriguingly Luke quotes Peter in Acts saying that Judas's replacement should have 'accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John'.³ We don't have time to explore all the variants in the Gospel call narratives⁴ but the differences do serve as a reminder that the call to follow can and does come in many different ways and that we need to be extremely careful of ever becoming too prescriptive as to how anyone hears the call of Jesus. When it comes to the adventure of Christian discipleship the initiative is with Jesus. It is up to him how the journey begins and continues.

John highlights the effect that bearing witness or sharing testimony can have in encouraging others to follow Jesus. John the Baptist points Andrew and his companion to Jesus. Andrew in turn brings his brother Simon to the one he believes to be the Messiah. Philip finds Nathaniel and brings him to Jesus. Andrew and Philip reappear later in the Gospel bringing others to Jesus.⁵ Healthy disciples help to make and form other disciples. For Andrew and Philip this facet of discipleship was alive and fruitful from the beginning.

The nature of discipleship as adventurous following is explicit in John's call narrative. It is encapsulated in the phrases 'Come and see' and 'Follow me'. The supportive nature of discipleship as learning is more implicit but still strong. Speaking of the Gospel as a whole Raymond Brown argues that 'John presents a conspectus [or summary] of Christian vocation. There is a gradual deepening of insight and a profounder realization of who it is the disciples are following'. In the call narratives this all gets compressed with Andrew moving from addressing Jesus as Rabbi to telling Simon Peter that he has found the Messiah. Meanwhile Nathanael moves from cynicism and scepticism to deep devotional faith. Whilst our understanding may not deepen so dramatically or quickly, this episode reminds us of the continued importance of growing in the understanding of, and relationship to, the one we are following.

As well as sharing in the activities of his mission, healthy discipleship is reflective as well as active. In his very helpful book *The Reflective Disciple* Roger Walton explores in depth the importance of reflection pointing out that: 'Faithful reflection is practised by people who are in an active, living relationship with God. They have begun the journey of faith and are seeking to learn to live better as disciples of Christ, to exercise their faith more effectively in daily living'.⁶

In his subsequent volume *Disciples Together* Roger shares findings of research conducted into what he describes as the formative energies of discipleship. He concludes that for the Christian disciple mission, worship and intentional community are the three primary formative energies. He sees Christian education (or intentional learning) as being supportive of mission, worship and community and happening best in the contexts of these three energies or activities.

In John's story telling Philip identifies Jesus to Nathanael as the one 'about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote'.⁷ A reminder that Word of God has an important part to play in forming discipleship.

John's account of the calling of the first disciples ends with Jesus sharing a glorious vision with the freshly called Nathanael. '*Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.*'⁸

John's Gospel is full of pictures, visions, miracles and signs that reveal the glory of God the Father and God the Son. Immediately after his account of the calling of the first disciples John tells the story of the miracle at the Wedding in Cana where Jesus turns water into wine. At the end of the story John says how 'Jesus did this... and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him'.⁹ Here we see the importance of God's glory in Jesus for John and for us in our discipleship and in the encouragement of others pondering or participating in the adventure of discipleship. Glimpses of glory inspire, renew, energise. Wherever and however we are called to live out our discipleship we need such moments to sustain and inspire us and to help us keep on putting one foot after another on the adventure of discipleship. This is true for all disciples including the comparatively few who are 'set apart' by way of ordination.

One of the most reassuring aspects of John's presentations of the disciples is the way in which they are 'not examples of perfect faith, but of positive and typical misunderstandings'.¹⁰ Nathanael's famously grumpy 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?'¹¹ is a reminder of the dangers of prejudice and bigotry but also paradoxically a point of hope for us all. For if Nathanael could be so wrong and yet be promised that he will 'see heaven opened',¹² what glorious experiences may we who get life and faith mixed up and wrong on a regular basis encounter on the adventure of discipleship? We are works in progress, being changed by grace into the likeness of the one we follow on a journey of transformation that will only be complete in Heaven.

John and Mary Bramley are a lovely Christian couple from my home town of Stafford. John lived out his discipleship as an orthopaedic surgeon whilst Mary lived hers as a nurse. In addition, John was a local preacher and together they hosted a fellowship group in their home. Having given of themselves gladly and generously, when the time came for retirement, no-one could have begrudged them a retirement filled with grandchildren, cruises, coach trips and tea cakes at garden centres. But these extraordinary, ordinary disciples were willing to sacrifice that for a few years and went to serve as medical missionaries in a leprosy mission hospital in Bhutan. It was deeply humbling to hear John explaining why they were going, saying that they could not pray the prayers they prayed and sing the hymns and songs they sang without being willing to respond to the call of Jesus. And so they went to share in the healing, loving work of Jesus in that far away country. Writing at the age of 81 having been back home for 16 years, survived a heart attack and now surrounded by grandchildren John said

*It has been my Christian faith and experience that in spite of adverse circumstances, sometimes created by my own failures, and sometimes beyond my control, that ultimately all things have worked together for good in my life, with undeserved blessings and strong hope for the future.*¹³

The stories of John and Mary and Samuel in our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures remind us that we are never too old and never too young to be called by God. The calls we experience may or may not be as dramatic as theirs but this does not matter. We may be called to care for a neighbour, teach gardening skills to those with learning difficulties or be the welcoming presence at Church. What matters is our availability and our willingness to say yes when the Lord calls.

Early in the New Year many of us share in Covenant Services renewing our commitment to the Lord who calls us. I wonder what we will be called to do in 2024?

Hymn – Here I am

*Ch) Here I am wholly available
As for me I will serve the Lord*

1) The fields are white unto harvest
But oh the labourers are so few
So Lord I give myself to help the reaping
To gather precious souls unto You

2) The time is right in the nation
For words of power and authority
God's looking for a people who are willing
To be counted in His glorious victory

3) As salt are we ready to savour
In darkness are we ready to be light
God's seeking out His very special people
To manifest His truth and His might

Chris Bowater © 1981 Sovereign Lifestyle Music CCL No. 515642

Prayers of Intercession¹⁴

For those who wait for the night to end - bless them.

Who wait for the night to begin - bless them.

Who wait in the hospital room, who wait in the cell, who wait in prayer - bless them.

Who wait for news, who wait for the phone call, who wait for a word, who wait for a job, a house, a child - bless them.

Who wait for one who will come home, who wait for one who will not come home - bless them.

Who wait with fear, who wait with joy, who wait with peace, who wait with rage, who wait for the end, who wait for the beginning, who wait alone, who wait together - bless them.

Who wait without knowing what they wait for or why - bless them.

Who wait when they should not wait, who wait when they should be in motion, who wait when they need to rise, who wait when they need to set out - bless them.

Who wait for the end of waiting, who wait for the fullness of time, who wait emptied and open and ready, who wait for you - O bless. **Amen.**

StF 407 – Hear the call of the kingdom

1) Hear the call of the kingdom,
lift your eyes to the King;
let his song rise within you
as a fragrant offering
of how God, rich in mercy,
came in Christ to redeem
all who trust in his unfailing grace.

*Ch) King of heaven, we will answer the call.
We will follow, bringing hope to the world,
filled with passion,
filled with power to proclaim
salvation in Jesus' name.*

2) Hear the call of the kingdom
to be children of light
with the mercy of heaven,
the humility of Christ;
walking justly before him,
loving all that is right,
that the life of Christ may shine through us.

3) Hear the call of the kingdom
to reach out to the lost
with the Father's compassion
in the wonder of the cross,
bringing peace and forgiveness,
and a hope yet to come:
let the nations put their trust in him.

Keith & Kristyn Getty and Stuart Townend © 2006 Thankyou Music CCL No. 515642

A Sending out Prayer

So now we go out with confidence in you, our loving God who leads us; you know our weaknesses and our strengths. Lord, call us, guide us, and strengthen us in your service. And may the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be with us and this world that God loves this day and forever. **Amen.**

* Prayers (except Intercessions) and other material adapted from ROOTs for Worship

¹ Susan E Hysten, *Imperfect Believers, Ambiguous Characters in the Gospel of John*, Louisville: John Knox Press, 2009, p59.

² Andreas J Köstenberger, *The Mission of Jesus and the Disciples according to the Fourth Gospel*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998, p149.

³ Acts 1:21-22

⁴ Some commentators suggest that John may actually record the first meeting of Jesus with his disciples whilst Matthew, Mark and Luke tell of a subsequent encounter by Lake Galilee.

⁵ The boy with his loaves and fish. John 6.8 and the Greeks at the Feast John 12.22.

⁶ Roger L Walton, *The Reflective Disciple*, London: SCM Press, 2012, p115.

⁷ John 1.45

⁸ John 1.51

⁹ John 2.11

¹⁰ Susan E Hysten, *Imperfect Believers, Ambiguous Characters in the Gospel of John*, Louisville: John Knox Press, 2009, p60.

¹¹ John 1.46

¹² John 1.51

¹³ John Bramley, *Remember Who You Represent, Sandy: Authors on Line*, 2009.

¹⁴ *Blessing for Waiting*. Jan Richardson (copyright Jan Richardson @ www.janrichardson.com)
Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons