

### **What does it mean to try to be holy?**

In the first and the last readings of this Sunday, 1 Samuel 3:1-10 and John 1:43-51, the story is of someone noticing and paying attention to what could easily be missed, overlooked and forgotten.

The first is Samuel. This young lad, perhaps less than 10 years of age, lived as servant to Eli, the Incumbent of the Temple.

I don't know the floor plan of the Temple, but I imagine Eli having a room to sleep in, just off the main worship area, with a small side room, or passage way connected, where young Samuel slept. Not bedrooms like ours, but a rolled out sleeping mat and a low chair or stool nearby.

I think of the quiet of the night. Israel's temple would not have had glass in its "windows" so the breath of the wind and the sounds of a small city would waft into the building. Mostly it would have been warm at night. I imagine Eli being old, wobbly, using a staff to walk with and needing the help of this boy simply to get through the day.

They have settled down to sleep. In the distance a dog barks in and perhaps an owl hoots in reply. Then Samuel wakes up with the echo of a voice, as you do when something wakes you from sleep and you cannot tell whether it was a sound in the room or a sound in your dream. But he thought it was "Samuel!", so naturally, he went to see the old man. "You called," he said, "here I am". But no, Eli had not called.

So I think, if it had been me, I would have said to myself, "It was a dream, you silly old fool! Now go back to sleep and no more of that nonsense!"

Shortly afterwards, just nodding off, Samuel sits bolt upright. He's fully awake before the voice has ended. "I heard it. It's not a dream. He's calling me!" and off runs the lad to see what old Eli wants. "Here I am. You really did call me this time!"

Eli struggles up out of sleep, possibly a bit grumpy, possibly a bit befuddled, possibly thinking, "No more chocolate for that boy after supper."

The whole thing repeats a third time.

Now, it is becoming embarrassing. Samuel would be wondering about Eli's Alzheimer's and Eli would be wondering about a boy with hallucinations.

Would you, in Samuel's place, have gone to Eli again? Would you have doubted him? Or yourself?

When you think, "I haven't seen that lady who always sits two rows in front of me and wears a blue hat for weeks. I should ask about her and maybe call her up." When that happens, do you act on it? Do you listen?

When it strikes you, "I should really eat better. And, come to that, I should start to say my prayers before bed." Do you let that settle into your mind and do something about it? Or do you just let it slip by, with all the other thoughts?

If Samuel had not listened, heard, acted and asked.....all four steps..... he would never have come to know God, and become the great prophet and leaders of Israel.

Now think about Philip's story.

Again I want to pad it out with some "pretending that I was there".

Philip is Nathaniel's brother. I guess his older brother. He is older because he knows stuff. He knows, as every sane person does, that nothing good comes out of Nazareth, "The men are too skinny, the children weak minded, the girls are not pretty and the wine has a sour taste and the cheese....." However in Bethsaida "all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average." Nathaniel has strong opinions about dozens of things, possibly everything!

But I imagine Philip like a younger brother, a bit less sure of himself, a young man open to new possibilities. He hangs around public speakers and listens to the new ideas of travelling preachers. He may be a little "new age" one day, and possibly open to telepathy the next. He is a seeker. Truth matters to him. He had been listening to John the Baptist along with Andrew and others from the Bethsaida village. When Jesus appeared and John spoke so well of him they all gradually met Jesus and he was like a magnet to them. Maybe he was the Messiah John talked about. Pretty soon Philip was in on the whole Jesus idea.

Now pause a moment and consider Philip. He has already told his family that he is signing up as a follower of John. Bug-eating, crazy clothing, fiery preaching John. Nathaniel was having none of that. He had trees to tend and stuff to do! If Philip ever asked Nathaniel for his thoughts about John I am sure that Nathaniel had plenty of them. Why, of all the people in the world you might want to tell, would you share this new hope, this tender belief, this exciting and totally unproven theory with grumpy big brother know-it-all Nathaniel? Of course he's going to stamp on your excitement, extinguish your sunny idealism and bring "reality" down like a like a black suffocating cloud!

"We've found him! The one Moses talked about. Yes we have, and all the prophets talked about him too! We've found him. His dad's called Joseph, he's called Jesus and he comes from Nazareth!"  
Inevitably, Nathaniel kicks into the well worn pattern... "Nazareth! Nothing good comes out of Nazareth!"  
But quickly, before another word is said, Philip says, "Come and see, he's just round the corner having a sandwich"  
As a result, Nathaniel, who can trade one strong opinion for a better strong opinion when he sees one, ends up saying to Jesus, "You are the Son of God, You are the King of Israel!"

If Philip had not been an open-minded person, he would never have been able to listen to John the Baptist. Nor would he have listened very closely to John's saying, "This one, this Jesus here, He's the One!" Philip was prepared to try believing in something, someone new.

Philip was brave enough to risk ridicule from an elder, wiser, more belt-and-braces sort of a brother.  
Would you have brought your tender, new and unproven hope to a critical audience?  
Would you have trusted your new understanding of God's plan to a family member who was always right?

What Philip did was to be "undefended" in his search for God. "Undefended" means to take off the armour of "what everyone else thinks" or "rock-solid certainties which keep you from having to think". It means being vulnerable to mockery, easily made to look foolish, soft-headed, *un*worldly-wise. He was open enough to hear John, open enough to try to see Jesus with un-pre-judging eyes.

He was open to risk believing.

And he was open enough to risk sharing it with the grumpy brother who he loved most in all the world.

To be open listening...How often do we finish someone's sentence in our heads before they get there? Or have our reply ready before they've got half way?

How careful are you not to appear foolish in the eyes of others? Especially in the eyes of an older sibling?

How fearful are we of appearing naïve, simple, easily misled?

How often have you been silent about your faith, for fear of being judged by family, friend or even strangers?

Both Philip and Samuel are people who found themselves, out of a certain simplicity of soul, in the presence of God. Holiness, something to which every follower of Christ is actually called, holiness is not about being very pious, or religious or intolerably difficult to live with.

Holiness is about being uncluttered with certainties and orthodoxies. It is about being quiet enough inside to listen. Still enough inside to notice.

Holiness is about a daily practice of shutting off the noise and busyness and intentionally making yourself undefended, open, expectant before God. It is about prayer.

Not prayer as sending God requests, or helpful hints about how to make the world better, but prayer of simply coming into the presence of your Lord and being quiet and waiting on his word, his call, his stillness.

To be holy is to be like a still pool of clear water from which the thirsty can drink.

(Most of what you hear in a day is, by comparison, a series of muddy puddles swirling with opinion and noise, polluted and unfit for human consumption.)

In these stories Philip and Samuel are small people. But the story is told of them because in it they are great in the Kingdom of Heaven. May you aspire to be great in the Kingdom of Heaven. May we have courage, small as we are, to seek a holy path. Amen.