

Reflection

Sunday 17 January 2021

“Is it I?”

The first part of the lectionary readings to resonate for us (me) was “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” For me (Sandra) I think the resonance relates to me coming from Wainuiomata. Can anything good come out of Wainuiomata? Could easily be a question Wellingtonians ask (Tama Umunga!) So perhaps the human tendency to create negative associations between people and their birthplace is age old. Dawn Hutchings on the progressive christianity website has a great reflection on this verse “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Absolutely, she says. When we begin see in everyone who comes into our lives, the ONE who is the source of our being, then the dream becomes a reality as we begin to know our common humanity. Then everyone everywhere can be loved into wholeness, even our very far from perfect selves.”

But we moved on and started to look at the themes between our Hebrew Bible and Gospel readings. What commonalities could we find in Samuel, Philip and Nathaniel? Samuel and Nathaniel have a few common threads - both are closely linked to the temple - Samuel as a young boy, serving the less than perfect, aging and blind Eli. Nathaniel was “under the fig tree”. Scholars tell us this is code for studying the Torah and other scholarly pursuits.

We thought especially about Samuel. His life was preordained for him; given to the Temple by his mother Hannah at birth. And yet whatever hopes he had of doing well and becoming a man of God were likely threatened by the limitations of Eli and perhaps his own humble beginnings. We also wondered about Samuel’s lack of status at the Temple. He it was who was called even though there were others more senior and knowledgeable such as Eli. Was there an honesty, an authenticity about Samuel which made him the right choice?

What were the themes about their being called?

Both were called by name - Samuel in his dream not at first recognising that it was God and not Eli. Nathaniel hearing Jesus, but wondering if it could in fact be a call from God. Philip also hearing the call and responding immediately.

There were no trumpets, no ceremonies. We know that Samuel's call was repeated three times before he heard it. We can imagine that Jesus speaking in the open space might have been easy to miss - even if he called you by name.

Samuel and Nathaniel both needed some explanations - the voice alone was not enough. Samuel relied on Eli to help his discernment. In this case we have much sympathy for Eli, who fully expected God's wrath but insisted that Samuel hide nothing from him.

For his part Nathaniel needed Philip to explain who Jesus was, or so we read in this part of the Gospel. Philip had also been called, and presumably talked with his friends Andrew and Peter - or that is my assumption from the statement "we have found the one ..." . It's OK to seek outside assistance and support to help discern the authentic voice.

Once called life changed for Samuel and the disciples. Everything in their lives was different after responding to the call. Nathaniel became one of the 12 disciples that followed Jesus through his time of preaching, was there after Easter and tradition tells us he continued to be a leader in the early church. Samuel became a significant prophet in the Jewish tradition. They got to speak harsh and unwelcome words of truth to people around them. Not always well received - imagine the much older Samuel facing Saul and telling him he will be the last of his line to be king of Israel. But what we do see in the Hebrew Bible and what the tradition of the early church tells is of the disciples an authentic life.

We pondered who we would see as being called in more modern times - names like Martin Luther King Jnr came up. We also thought of Nelson Mandela, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Vincent van Gogh and our own Kate Shepherd. You can certainly add your own names to the list. The list

can include both religious (across all denominations) and non religious people. Who for you symbolises the person who follows a higher calling, living an authentic life that shapes and improves the lives of others in their community and across the globe?

It is particularly apt for us to include Martin Luther King this week. Monday 18th Jan in many US states is a public holiday in honour of Martin Luther King and to honour his passion for a non violent end to racial segregation. Martin Luther King is a man who followed a call, he certainly saw his call as one from God. The life that King was called to follow is not an easy one, and of course ended with his assassination. His family gave up much for King to follow his call. For King it was never enough for him to follow alone - to make the change he saw as God inspired and required meant everyone needed to change their behaviour. We can all squirm a little when we think of this quote from King: "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." King, like Bonhoeffer, was very strong on the messages about the silence of good people in the face of injustice.

Is that call always an external voice? We may not have the benefit of a direct call, and yet in order to live an authentic life with meaning we need to find our own 'calling'. We attended the Van Gogh multimedia exhibition yesterday and found ourselves in the thrall of a person striving, and ultimately giving up everything in the quest to follow his calling. Van Gogh seemed to struggle through day to day life events, and yet be driven by his art. Van Gogh commented that ' A great fire burns within me, but no one stops to warm themselves at it, and passers-by only see a wisp of smoke.'

And yet, like many of the old testament prophets he was not understood, even saying at one point that he hoped that after his death his paintings would be worth more than the paint they were constructed of.

Consider the contemporary reading Tony found as we explored our thinking on authentic lives. Dr Parker J Palmer is a Quaker who speaks and writes on leadership, spirituality and social change. He is one of the

founders of the Center for Courage & Renewal. We liked this idea that the voice wasn't always out there but might be one we already have inside - but we need to listen to ourselves, observe our own reaction to experiences we have and then accept the truth we hear. This Palmer tells us may be messy. Certainly was for Eli hearing Samuel's truth. Have you been in a situation where either your inner voice or your trusted advisor has told you a truth that was hard to hear?

Like the call of God in the Hebrew Bible, this internal voice guiding us on an authentic life is not going to be an easy ride. As King said "There comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe nor politic nor popular, but we must take it because our conscience tells us it is right." It will also always be true that the authentic life for each of us will be different. An 18th century Hassidic Rabbi from Eastern Europe named Rabbi Zusya, when he was an old man, said, "In the coming world, they will not ask me, 'Why were you not Moses?' They will ask me, 'Why were you not Zusya?'" We must find our own authentic path.

What do I bring to our community that could hold even a fraction of the meaning that Van Gogh or Martin Luther King attempted to bring to theirs? What indeed do any of us here?

