

Epiphany 2: Callings

2 Samuel 3.1-20; Psalm 139.1-6, 13-18; Revelation 5-1-10; John 1.43-51

A major theme of today's readings is that of being called. Samuel is called by God to make known the prophecy against the house of Eli. Eli was at one time the high priest at Shiloh one of the ancient resting places of the arc of the covenant before it found a permanent resting place in the Temple in Jerusalem. Philip is called by Jesus who will establish a new covenant and through Philip Nathanael will also come to be a disciple of the Lord. It is Jesus who by his perfect offering for our iniquity meaning our gross injustice and our wickedness becomes our salvation by being faithful to his call to do the Father's will even unto death.

Samuel is confused by the initial calling running to Eli the priest at the shrine in Shiloh, where he is serving having been dedicated to God by Hannah his mother. Hannah promised that should she be granted a child she would dedicate the child to God. Eli understands it is God who is calling Samuel. Eli therefore directs Samuel saying, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" And as we heard God calls Samuel again. The prophecy Samuel receives is against Eli's house and more specifically against Eli himself, who being old no longer had the strength and the will to rebuke his sons for blaspheming God by their greed through which they violated the customary offering. Eli has brought destruction on his house. The punishment is harsh say the least. "Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering for ever."

The reason one assumes these readings concerning calling very different in character are set alongside each other is to remind us of a common early Christian belief captured in verses from the Letter to the Hebrews one of the readings set for Christmas that God is at work in every age. It details what theologians term a high Christology in which Jesus as the Son is “the exact imprint of God’s very being”. Jesus is present at the creation of the worlds. At the very beginning. It is he who sustains all things by his word by his will. And through him it is made known that God has made purification for our sins. Even the sin of the House of Eli one can ask? “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.” (Hebrews 1:1-3)

This is heady stuff. This is rich fare. Where might we proceed to from here? We can ask ourselves what does Jesus’ making purification for sin and sitting at the right hand of God actually accomplish. What difference does it make to my life or yours? Our life as part of the Church? The world? For an answer we can look to the third reading set for today from the Book of Revelation. No one in heaven and on earth is found worthy to open the scroll of the book.

The picture painted is of a book sealed with seven seals. The seer’s reaction to this state of affairs is to weep bitterly because the book can’t be opened or looked into. The image suggests that as long as the book is sealed the way to God that must be beyond the created order of earth and heaven is closed. The door is firmly shut. An

elder, who this elder is we do not know, comes to the seer assuring him that there is one who can open the sealed book. Here again we are exposed to what the theologians call a high Christology, but now from a different angle firmly rooted in Hebrew typology. “Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”

We might ask what has the Lion of Judah, in the Book of Revelation also called the Lamb of God accomplished. In the words of Paul the Apostle, Jesus the Lion of Judah has conquered both sin and death. Really? When we look around us, when we listen to the news, when we read the papers sin is flourishing undiminished and death is a daily reality. Here we might consider words from the hymn *Abide with me* by the Anglican Scottish priest Henry Francis Lyte

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;
Earth's joys grow dim; its glories pass away;
Change and decay in all around I see;
O Thou who changest not, abide with me.

Sin and death, change and decay still have dominion, but in the end they have been vanquished. This fundamental belief is where we put our trust made known through and personalised in the life of Jesus. In truth sin and death have no dominion over us, although they by our permission continue to reign in us aided by weak wills and false tolerance, especially where there is no daily discipleship, no daily struggle, no daily yes to God and this underlining reality by which we will be judged. Think of Eli, the high priest who did not rebuke his sons for their blasphemy against God. His is a particularly tragic story as he had served God faithfully for forty years.

Our sins have been expiated (washed away), because sin has been vanquished through the cross. But in the meantime we as human beings continue with some dogged determination and levels of purposefulness to commit sin of which the atrocities we are capable of are condemn us. Atrocities that are often beyond our imagining, beyond our worst nightmares. We can think of the horrific atrocities committed on 7 October and the Israeli response to them that shows no mercy as Israeli hostages are still held by Hamas who in turn show no mercy. Every time evil is unleashed we are rightly and justly offended, but we must also have a closer look to ourselves. Champagne socialists? Armchair critics? Busybodies? Know it alls? Do-nothings? Practitioners of detachment? Time-servers? Virtue signallers?

It is a part of our calling as Christians to always be preparing ourselves to be with God daily and at the end of our lives. But we must also always be prepared for the evils of humanity. We must not be naive. Our belittling of sin and its consequences does not serve us well, as day by day boundaries well established are eroded and the rot sets in. At the beginning of a new year may we take to heart words again taken from the Letter to the Hebrews

“by laying aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider [the Lion of the tribe of Judah, The Lamb of God] who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you [and I] may not grow weary or lose heart.” (Hebrews 12:1-3) Think of Eli.

Finally, Jesus comes not only to Galilee, but he also comes to Christ Church,
Vienna Sunday by Sunday and finding there those who believe says to them,
'Follow me.' **Amen.**