

SERMON FOR EPIPHANY 2: 14 JANUARY 2024 AT GW COMMUNION (based on 1 Sam.3:1-10 and John 1:43-end)

Lord, you speak to us in many ways, through rushing wind, or still small voice, in Scripture's Word or through your Grace. Grant us ears to hear, eyes to see, hearts to understand, and lives prepared to do your will. In the name of Jesus Christ our Saviour, amen.

Knowing and being known

Our Old Testament and Gospel readings today are very much about hearing, seeing, understanding and knowing, or indeed being known - perfect for this 2nd Sunday of Epiphany, the season of enlightenment. I found myself reflecting on what it means to be understood and known. Friends made later in our lives may know us from how we appear to them now, but past experiences contribute to who we are - so the picture they have is incomplete. Does that matter? Not really, and yet I wonder if there is something within us that seeks to be fully known and, more importantly, understood. It may be that we are content not to be, through fear of vulnerability and the risk of exposure to judgement or rejection. Is the season of Epiphany, then, perhaps not just about God making himself known to us, but also about our being known fully by him?

“Speak, for your servant is listening”. In Samuel's response to God, we have the essence of being called as God's people. God spoke four times - he didn't give up until he received a response. Furthermore, summed up in that response, are guiding principles that permeate our readings, and remain just as relevant today. God may choose to speak with any one of us at any time. However, if we are not attuned, it can be easy to miss God's voice. Like Samuel, who needed Eli to help him understand that it had been God calling out to him, we too may need help. Part of our community of faith is the support offered by others in coming to understand the call from God. Who, me? Surely not! So many people in the Bible, whom God has called, have responded similarly, feeling they don't have the gifts, or even perhaps the depth of faith. Jacob, Moses and David were unlikely candidates; and Jesus called lowly fishermen to be his disciples.

As for Samuel's call to be a prophet, it comes at a point, we are told, when he “did not yet know the Lord and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him”. Until that night, he'd had no direct experience of God through a dream or vision. For that was how God made himself known at that

time, and those to whom he appeared spoke his word as prophets. He has tasks, big and small, for all of us. Samuel's was to halt the religious neglect that had long been happening under Eli's weak leadership. A new prophet was to lead the Temple and its faithful into a new era.

Now if our Bible stopped at the Old Testament, we might wonder how we today would have come to know God, few of us having access to prophets or visions. But we have God incarnate through his son Jesus, a revelation shared with everyone, not just a selected few prophets. And it is the passage from John's gospel that has helped me to think of revelation and knowing as a two way process, one in which we see and know and are in turn seen and known. Firstly, Philip explains to Nathanael who Jesus is: "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth". Those listening would have understood that Jesus was someone very special, having been foretold by a host of respected prophets; yet also one of their own, coming from a very ordinary place. Which is what confused Nathanael – how can someone special come from Nazareth? His scepticism might make us wonder why on earth Philip chose to bring him along as a potential disciple. But clearly Philip knew him well and had seen something in Nathanael that inspired him to take him to Jesus. Philip also knew that simply coming to see Jesus would be all that Nathanael would need. Seeing is believing – how true in this instance!

But Jesus, in turn, saw and understood Nathanael. "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit", Jesus says of him. Nathanael, surprised at such a direct appraisal, asks: "Where did you come to know me?". Jesus' answer reveals a divine level of insight – far more than could possibly have been gleaned from simply seeing him under a fig tree. Suddenly Nathanael has his own epiphany, recognising Jesus as Son of God and King of Israel.

It is the final words in particular of our passage from John that highlight the difference between the Old and New Testament ways of knowing God. Jesus tells the disciples that they "will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man". Those words remind us of Jacob's dream of the ladder to heaven in Genesis. But here, Christ tells us that he will be the ladder, the two-way connection between humankind and God. Through his incarnation in Jesus, not only do we come to know

something of God, but also that God fully knows us. And if we feel apprehensive at being known so thoroughly, we can find solace in God's understanding of that state. After all, God became human not just to be with us, but to be one of us, subject to the same vulnerability and risk of rejection.

It is not possible to be fully known or understood by everyone. What matters is being understood by God. And if we believe that God does understand us, perhaps we can believe also that he does not reject us, but accepts us, warts and all.

I think the Psalm for today has a beautiful way of saying what I am struggling a bit to explain about how well God does know us and how perhaps we wrestle with the immensity of coming to know God. So I shall end with a few verses from Psalm 139.

“Lord, you have searched me and known me; you know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, are acquainted with all my ways. How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! I try to count them – they are more than the sand; I come to the end – I am still with you.”

In the name of Christ, amen.