

- 1 Samuel 3:1-10 The Lord calls Samuel
- John 1:43-50 Jesus calls Philip and Nathanael

Calls were rare then

In the days of Samuel, the Lord's call was rare. I've been told that God had never spoken to Eli in all the years he had been priest, but a man had spoken the Lord's words to him. Nevertheless, Eli was a man who was faithful to God and after a little while he recognised God's call. However, God's call became more frequent over the years. In the days of Jesus, there wasn't anything particularly supernatural about God's call because in one sense, Jesus was "just a man". These days, God's call is still something that we are able to hear clearly, if only we listen.

Not quite a fairy tale

As we read the story of Samuel's call, however, I always think back to the fairy tales I knew as a child and still know as a parent. In the story of the three billy goats gruff, the first and second billy goats are treated in a particular way but there is a contrast in the third billy goat. In the same way, we have three little pigs. The first two get what is coming to them, but the third is treated differently. I always wanted to write a story ending with the line "and so they all arrived safely home, and they had never needed to look inside the third magic envelope" but that just wouldn't do. In Samuel's case, the Lord calls him and he thinks it is Eli, so Samuel runs to Eli. The same thing happens a second time, and then Eli recognises what is happening, and on the third attempt, Samuel hears and responds to God's call. Eventually, recognition came.

Continuation

In just the same way, God calls us, each and every one of us. He will keep on calling, keep on knocking at the door until we answer His call. He won't come in until we invite Him, which could be a very long time indeed. For some of us, years may pass before we respond: others may respond on the very first occasion we hear Him: others may never take any notice at all. Once we have taken notice and accepted Him, then our lives will never be the same.

God's requests

God will show and map out a plan for us, probably one piece at a time, but it is up to us to recognise the pieces of the plan as they are shown to us and it is also up to us to do what God wants. Our God will scarcely ever force any of us to do anything we do not choose to do. Our God, whom we love and serve, is not a tyrant. He is not sadistic and cruel. That is why he will not generally call people to do things for no good reason which they hate or fear or find loathsome in some way.

We are not all called to be missionaries to places where utter darkness reigns. We are not all called to minister to the dying. Some of us will hear God's call to those things, some of us will become inflamed with desire to do those things and will go on to do them very well, but most of us will not. Instead, God will call us to what might seem in some sense very ordinary work indeed. We will be called to full time Christian work: all of us are called to full time Christian work, but it may not be in what some people both inside and outside the church think is Christian work. During and after our time in Vanuatu, we found people inside and outside the church who could not grasp that although we were white people in Vanuatu, we were not

missionaries. My work was in the computer section of the Ministry of Finance and not in a mission church.

Nevertheless, there were opportunities to share God's love with people there just as there are opportunities here in Upper Hutt and throughout Aotearoa New Zealand wherever we happen to be.

Full time Christian work includes such things as

- growing a family
 - building a church
 - teaching at a school
 - working for a bank
 - using machinery in a factory
- or whatever other work God calls you to do.

God of ordinary things

Our God is the God of miracles, but He is also the God of ordinary things far more. Miracles do happen, but they are rare. If they were not, then we would not be able to build a view of the world we live in that we could be safe and comfortable with, because too many startling and unexplainable things would happen. It's bad enough as it is! Our God is the God of ordinary things, and we see this in the Gospel reading, where Jesus was speaking to Nathanael, simply about having seen him under a fig tree, yet that was enough to inspire him to follow.

God does ordinary things well: most of the time that he moves people to different places he does so by natural means. Generally, if God's plan requires people to be in a different place to where they are, he will call on Mr. Ford or Mr. Boeing for assistance, rather than have them magically moved to other places. So it is that I have found myself both learning from and ministering to the people of God in different places in three different countries and never once been transported supernaturally. The ministry

we have offered has sometimes been particular to the people we have been close to and sometimes could have been offered by anyone, but we see God's plan in it. Sometimes. Sometimes, we don't see God's plan until afterwards and sometimes we may not see it at all.

Two examples

Let me give two examples. First, what happened to be in Oxford? I was studying for a course I was ill-suited to, I was unhappy and at the end of the year I failed the exams. Yet in that year, I had learned a great many things about myself and about life and I found that my faith and spiritual strength was far greater as a result. Too bad that I hadn't learned enough mathematics, but the Lord was gracious to me in that I went on to graduate from Liverpool University. Second, a dear friend of ours who was and still is deeply involved in Bible translation work found that he was unable to print the text of the scriptures using the computer and printer he had. He knew what the problem was and had the manual for the printer, but he was a translator, not a computer man. And like so many manuals, it too might as well have been in another language. Yet on this first evening that I met him, and even though he had been rude about my church, I was able to work through the printer manual and solve a problem which had been delaying their work for weeks if not months. He was so excited to see that it was now printing correctly that he telephoned one of his friends to share the news. I'm not sure his friend was pleased to receive a call at such an hour.

The Bible and prayer

Of course, we have a manual too. It was written in a foreign language but by the faith and calling of people like

our friend in times gone by, it is available to us in our own language. God's message to us in the Bible is a clear instruction book, a living book, a living message that is as good a pointer and signpost as we can receive. However, we must read it regularly, carefully and prayerfully to make the most of it. The other thing that will help us to hear God's call in our own lives is prayer. By speaking to God, we can hear God speaking to us. By listening to our own requests carefully, we can often hear or be inspired to solutions. God can speak directly to us, or he can use the words of the holy Bible, or he can use the lives and words of other Christians. He can inspire us and call us using other holy books or any other method: books, music, television: lines from poems whether they were originally inspired or not. Quite simply, God can use almost any means to make us more aware of him, but we need to be listening, aware, tuned to what He is trying to tell us.

The message

So if I have a message for you, it is this: Listen for the repeated and repeating calls of God in your life. Don't expect it to be in a supernatural way. God can call you through the very ordinary things of life. Listen, and if you have never trusted Him with your life, consider well whether this is the time to do so; if you did that long ago, listen carefully for some new way that He is calling you: maybe He is calling you in some new direction now, maybe He is confirming that what you are doing is the right way now, maybe he is pointing down a new road in your life. I don't know: however, I do know that God's plan for your life is unique to you and that to follow it every step of the way will be the most exciting life you could ever hope to have.