

Sermon preached at St Andrew's Church Soham on 14th January 2018 – Epiphany 2
John 1:43-51; 1 Samuel 3:1-10; Psalm 139

I wonder what images come to mind when you think of God. I don't mean visual images, of what God looks like, but ideas about God's character, personality, what Jesus was like when he was here on earth. I was doing a Bible-reading activity with a friend one day this week, using imagination to enter into a Bible passage and see what we noticed. We were looking at the story of Jesus visiting Simon's house where Simon's mother-in-law was ill. My friend imagined this as if she was Simon's wife, and she said this: When Jesus walked through the door I just knew there was something special about him. He is so beautiful and his face is so kind and his eyes look at you and are full of love.

I wonder how that fits with your picture of God.

In the psalm from which we heard an extract this morning, the psalmist describes being known by God. You might like to turn to the back of your bulletin and remind yourself of these words. "O 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 are acquainted with all my ways...". The psalmist is clear that we are known by God – we are known by God because God looks at us, searches us out, examines us, looks at the process which has brought us here. We are known by God. God knows our thoughts and our motivations, our choices, the life journey we have travelled. There is nowhere we can go that is out of God's reach – the psalmist says "Where can I go from your spirit, or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast." We are known by God.

I wonder how you feel, to hear that. I wonder what your response is to the idea of being known, really known, by God. I guess in part that's dependent on the picture you have of God, your ideas about God's character and personality.

The thing about being known like this is that there's no getting away from it. We can't escape God's care – or God's judgement. We are known. Just hold that thought for a moment, while we turn to look at our other two Bible readings.

In our first reading we hear of Samuel. Samuel was a much longed-for child. His mother, Hannah, had trouble conceiving and when finally, after much prayer and anguish, she produced Samuel, she dedicated him to God. Once he was old enough, though still a young boy, she gave him to God by giving him to the temple, to live with and learn from the priest. But when we look at the story we heard today, which took place some time later, one thing to notice is that despite the fact that Samuel has been given to God, to live with and learn from the priest, the passage says that he doesn't yet know God. He knows about God, but he hasn't yet encountered God for himself – hence he doesn't recognise God's voice when he hears it. He needs the help of someone else, Eli the priest, to know what's going on. But by answering God, as he does at the end of our reading, he begins a relationship with God. The following verses talk about the way in which Samuel becomes known as a trustworthy prophet of God, with God revealing himself to him. He is known by God and, over time, he comes to know God.

I wonder whether we recognise God's voice when we hear it. I wonder whether we recognise and respond, or whether, like Samuel, we need someone to help us to understand who we have heard. I wonder whether any of us ever find ourselves in that role of helping someone else to hear God's voice. I wonder whether we hear God's voice sometimes, but miss it when it occurs in unexpected places.

In our Gospel passage we hear some more examples of God calling. In the verses just before the bit we heard, John the Baptist is telling everyone who will listen that Jesus is the one they've been waiting for, the one from God. He has evidence to back this up, which we don't have time to look at now, but the result of this is that John's disciples leave John and start following Jesus. They realise that Jesus is the one John has been preparing them for. When

Jesus sees them following him, he asks what they're doing, what they're looking for, and when they ask him about himself he invites them to "Come and see". And they go, and bring others. The next day, in the passage we heard, Jesus says to someone else, Philip, "Follow me". That one tells another, Nathanael, "Come and see". And, in each of those cases, like Samuel in our first reading, they respond. They go with Jesus. They begin to get to know him.

We often talk about calling being to a particular job or role – and we are called to be and do particular things in order to be who God has made us to be. But here, in these passages, something different is happening. Samuel, and the various characters in the gospel reading and the bit before it, aren't being called to particular jobs or roles. Not here. Here, their calling is to "come and see", to "follow", to "listen". In becoming disciples of Jesus, Christians, their calling is to get to know God. The potential disciples, potential Christians, are being called to spend time with Jesus, listen to him, watch him, converse with him, share meals with him, laugh and cry with him, and in all of that, to get to know him. They are known by God – but God also wants to be known by them.

Their calling is to know, and to be known.

And our calling, too, as God's loved creation, made by God and belonging to God, is to know and to be known.

I wonder how well we know God. Not "know about God", but "know God". I wonder how willing we are to spend time with God, to listen to God, to converse with God, to get to know God rather than staying at a safe distance.

I wonder how willing we are to be known by God; to be loved, cared for, challenged; to be unable to escape God; to be not just "known", but "fully known".

Like any relationship, of course, it entails risk. It entails trust. It entails vulnerability. For some people that comes easily, while for others of us it has to be a repeated, conscious choice to spend time with God.

Our calling, as God's loved creation, made by God and belonging to God, is to know and to be known. May we take that risk.