

## On coming to know (as we are known) - A sermon on 1 Samuel 3.1-10

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‘When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became an adult, I put away childish things. Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.’

I’m sure you’ll recognise those words from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians (13.11-12).

For years they really only washed over me, but more recently they’ve taken on real significance. The older I get, the more my life unfolds (*unravels!*) the more I see it in these terms—as a journey of coming to know as I am already known.

The scriptures make the point time and again that we are known by God; known long before we know ourselves. In Psalm 139, the psalmist writes, ‘My frame was not hidden from you when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, *when none of them as yet existed*’ (vv. 15-16).

Jeremiah was told a similar thing: ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,’ God said to him, ‘before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations’ (Jer. 1.5).

It was the same for Isaiah (cf. Isa. 49.1) and for Samuel, dedicated and ministering in the sanctuary before he ‘knew’ the LORD.

In John’s gospel, when Nathanael asks Jesus, ‘Where did you get to know me?’ Jesus replied, ‘I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you’ (Jn. 1.48).

And so goes in reference after reference—the foreknowledge of God; the affirmation that we are known, long before we know ourselves.

But then on the *other* side, there’s this stress on *coming* to know as we are known, on attaining a fuller measure of who we are in Christ (cf. Eph 4.13). This is the journey I’m referring to, a journey, which is at the heart of what it means for me to be a follower of Jesus, a pilgrim on the Way.

You might say, ‘well that’s silly, I already know who I am; I’ve known for years’. But do any of us *really* know? Do we know ourselves as God knows us? The apostle Paul, for one, would say no. Indeed, it is generally affirmed in scripture (and in much psychology):

- that my identity and vocation is (at some level at least) obscure from me
- that it’s an expanding and deepening identity I must live into
- and that in order to *realise* it (in both senses of that word) I must entrust myself to a vulnerable journey, discerning the way *as I go*, never knowing for sure where it will take me.

In my experience, this has been anything but straightforward. There’ve been false starts and dead ends as I’ve tried to be someone other than myself, crises as I tried and failed to present myself a model of goodness and virtue (as if *that* was ever going to work!!); there’ve been strange twists and turns along the way—totally unexpected. There’s been joy and delight, sorrow and wounding—for me, and for others. Like I said, it’s been anything but easy.

What’s *heartening* is the reassurance that in this life it’s *never over*, even when we’re sure it is—when our carefully constructed plans have collapsed in a pile of dust on the floor and it’s 3am on a sleepless, dark night and the future looks utterly bleak. It’s not over. Though we lack the art to decipher it in that moment, there’s always more to discover of who we are in God, more to grow into, another chapter—no matter what our age or stage or current circumstance. As the aged poet Stanley Kunitz said in the final line of his poem *The Layers*: ‘*I’m not done with my changes.*’

So, the picture we get is one of “destiny” *and* discovery, vocation *and* responsibility, seed and growth.

From a scriptural perspective, my identity and life is not completely up to me, as if I can or have to generate and secure myself arbitrarily, from nothing, without direction or support. No, from the beginning I am known by God, uniquely created, drawn, called and supported by God—the God who has *plans*, as Jeremiah reminds Judah (cf. 29.11), plans for a hope and a future.

But neither is my life rigidly fixed in advance, my identity pre-set such that I have nothing to contribute and just live out the script. Instead, there’s this dynamic interplay between call and response, freedom and answerability,

creativity and obedience. To be a *disciple* is to engage this dynamic, and the story of Samuel offers some surprising suggestions for how we might do this.

As I said a couple of weeks ago, it's amazing what you notice when you pay attention to the details of these OT stories. The detail that's shone for me in recent readings of *this* story is the emphasis on 'lying down'. Did you hear it? It starts with the old priest Eli *lying down* in his room; meanwhile, Samuel is also *lying down* in the temple of the Lord. He hears a call: '*Samuel, Samuel*', and he runs to Eli, who tells him to '*lie down again*'. A second and a third time he goes to Eli, still mistaking God's call for Eli's, and again he's told: '*lie down*', '*lie down*'. Six times in 9 verses, Samuel or Eli *lies down*. Now, in a story about the call to prophetic *action* that's a lot of lying down!

So, what are we to make of this, if anything? What does it mean to 'lie down'?

When I think of lying down, I think of that relaxed state between full wakefulness and being out of it (notice Eli doesn't tell Samuel 'go to sleep', he says 'go and lie down'). When we lie down we enter a liminal space—a kind of neutral zone. To 'lie down' is to *slow down*, to *let down*... in this state our bodies and our minds go into a different rhythm, it's as if we come back to ourselves; our heart rate calms, our brain waves change. We loosen our grasp on what has to be done or sorted... Still and silent, things settle and clear... we become more open... we notice sounds we'd been missing—around us and within... a new thought pops into our mind, a new way of seeing something, energy returns and we arise with new purpose and direction.

When you think about it, a lot can happen when we lie down...surprising things can happen... [*whisper*] *Samuel... Samuel...*

When Samuel lay down he heard the call of God. Could it be that some disciplined 'lying down' would help our hearing too? And if it is important, what would it take to practise 'lying down' in your busy life, not just once or for a short time, but for as many times and as long as it takes?

To lie down as a practice of discipleship is counter intuitive for most of us, certainly in the west. It means non-involvement for a time, non-achievement, and less distraction. For many of us that's quite threatening. (Who am I when I'm not doing something? And what might emerge if I'm

not distracted?) It seems to me that lying down in this manner is far from a bludge; it's a serious and important commitment.

At certain points in life it's pretty much the only thing we can do – just lie down and let it be... In this story, Eli has just been told that his family is under judgement because of the corruption of his two sons; his house is in crisis; the priesthood of Israel will be taken away; his sons will die. It's a horrific prospect. Overwhelming. And what does the old man do? He lies down...

And, when eventually he realises that *Samuel* is being addressed by God, his instruction to the boy is the same – go back to your place and lie down. At certain points in life, it seems, that's exactly the right thing to do – just lie down. Any action at this point will be God's action; any activity on our part must proceed from waiting, from listening, from hearing the word of the Lord.

So there's another thought about discernment and 'coming to know'. As well as *being drawn* (as with Moses) it may also require some 'lying down'— slowing down... waiting... listening.

Even so, actually *discerning* the voice of God (as if I need to tell you) is no easy matter. How do we know it is God's voice we're hearing, and not some figment of our imagination? What does God sound like? Three times in this story, Samuel mistakes God's voice for Eli's. In the end, it's only because Eli senses what's going on that things proceed. It's not easy discerning God's voice.

Which suggests to me that most of us will need help— the support of a patient, discerning community, of those who, like Eli, are lying down and listening themselves, who have some experience in the matter. As I mentioned last time, we can be greatly assisted by those who notice what's happening in and around us. Sometimes a question from a person like this will make all the difference. That's certainly been the case for me at a number of crucial junctures in my life. Sometimes it's just an observation... --you seem to come alive when you... --you keep coming back to...

With attentive noticing, we can encourage one other in the practice of discernment. That's part of what it means (for me) to be a contemplative community.

But then, some of us *still* worry, don't we—what if we've already missed it? What if God was calling me and *no one* picked up the cues? What if I misheard or misunderstood it, (or worse, disobeyed it), and my life is irretrievably off course?

In light of such anxiety, the earthy, almost comical, story of Samuel's call is deeply reassuring. On more than one occasion in my life, the call I thought I sensed was vague at best and seemed not like such a good idea. Was I truly hearing this or just deluded? What I've discovered is that *some* of these senses disappear (and probably just as well), and some just keep nagging like God did with Samuel in this story—patiently calling, again and again, until I got it.

In the end, it seems, there isn't only one chance and nor is there just one path. God is not anxious. God is patient. If we are half-listening and vaguely willing, then (in the fullness of time) we *will* hear, and that will make all the difference in the world, just as it did with Samuel.

So there you are; a sermon on lying down. Not the sort of message we get in a lot of churches these days—desperate, as we are, to make something happen, to arrest the decline, to restore our greatness. Someone I'm sure who *would* encourage us in this practice is our very own Australian seer, Michael Leunig, so let me give the last word to him.

Dear God,  
We struggle, we grow weary, we grow tired.  
We are exhausted, we are distressed, we despair.  
We give up, we fall down, we let go. We cry.  
We are empty, we grow calm, we are ready.  
We wait quietly.  
A small, shy truth arrives.  
Arrives from without and within us.  
Arrives and is born. Simple, steady, clear.  
Like a mirror, like a bell, like a flame, like rain in summer  
A precious truth arrives and is born within us. Within our emptiness.  
We accept it, we observe it, we absorb it.  
We surrender to our bare truth.  
We are nourished, we are changed.  
We are blessed. We rise up.  
For this we give thanks. Amen.

Neil Millar  
Benedictus (27.06.15)