

***May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be now and always acceptable unto You, O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.***

In our readings today we learn again what an “epiphany” is ... that moment of special excitement, sheer joy, when we finally come to understand the truth of something very important that has previously been beyond our grasp.

The two readings recount the callings of Samuel and Nathanael in two different periods of history; Samuel, who was apprenticed to Eli over a thousand years before Christ and Nathanael who is brought to Jesus by Philip.

Just after our OT passage this morning our Lord Himself describes an epiphany as something that makes “both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle!” (v.11); that moment when the Holy Spirit comes to rest in us, and brings our faith in Jesus Christ to life ... making it more than just a possibility.

The OT reading tells us about the awakening of prophet Samuel who as a young boy, was sent by his mother Hannah to serve God, as a thanksgiving for allowing her to conceive and bear a son, despite the Lord having “closed her womb” (1 Sam 1: 6). Eli, a blind old priest who had failed to bring up his own sons to respect God and the Temple life to which they had been called (1 Sam 2), is given another chance to do a better job with Samuel. Samuel hears a voice in the night and assumes it is his master calling him. He eagerly runs to the next room to see what’s up ... “Here I am.”

The voice in Samuel’s head was so clear, that when it happened a second time in just the same way, he was *certain* that it was Eli who was calling him. Remember that at the start of the passage, we are told that “the word of the Lord was rare in those days”, as if to excuse Eli for not immediately understanding what was

going on. We learn too that Samuel, “did not know the Lord” yet, because “the word of the Lord had not been revealed to him.” However, when Samuel comes back a third time, Eli either; clicks to what is going on, or comes up with a cunning plan to ensure that this waking business doesn’t go on all night. He tells the boy instead of running next door and waking him, to stay where he is and say, “speak Lord, for your servant is listening.” Samuel does as he is told and receives the gift of prophecy. He learns about what is going to happen to Eli’s own sons because of their transgressions. The message isn’t pleasant but God had already revealed to Eli what was going to happen and so the message from Samuel serves as a confirmation of God’s word to him. In the process Samuel jumps a couple of classes. From this point on it became abundantly clear to everyone that Samuel “was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord.”

There is, however, a paradox in the story which adds to its complexity and reveals a very Jewish sense of humour. Eli’s name in Hebrew means “my God” and Samuel’s name means “God has heard.” By putting this story together in a slightly different way, we could say that God spoke through Hannah’s gift to God because He had heard her prayer. The boy runs to his master thinking of Eli as “his god” not recognising that it was in fact his real God Who was doing the calling. The boy’s earthly master, who is not a god at all, reveals truth of the story by faith, without knowing it himself. And finally, the boy reveals a prophecy to Eli about his family that confirms the word of the Lord that he had received previously; God had indeed heard.

The Gospel story too, reveals more than is immediately obvious about its central character. It appears that first century

Hebrews have more layers than a Samurai sword. We expect a story to describe the background, and the reason the story is important before getting to the meaty part. In contrast, the Hebrews might only reveal the background and the importance of the story by way of what is not said, through names of characters and places, and through oblique descriptive references. We often don't get to discover what's really going on until the very end when multiple highly integrated layers of mystery are revealed, and all the detail falls into place ... Agatha Christie on steroids!

When Nathanael is first introduced, we are told that "Philip found him" and Nathanael flippantly asks "can anything can good can come from Nazareth" ... perhaps in the same way that we might ask "can anything good come from Auckland?"

But Jesus ignores the jibe and describes Nathanael as "truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit." Jesus says that he "will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." Jesus is describing this fellow he hasn't previously met and recalling the story of Jacob's ladder (Gen 28: 12) as He does so, He reveals something of what Nathanael is called to. Jacob, the father of Israel, who wrestled with God in the night and had his hip dislocated, was the ideal Israelite of his age and, in coming face to face with God, was utterly transformed. This passage then is not so much a "call to mission", but an invitation to an epiphany! Nathanael comes, sees for himself and spontaneously follows the Son of God. The *encounter* with Christ is the potent force. The sheer presence of Christ draws him in. We too, are invited to see Jesus as *the new ladder*, stretching between heaven and earth; The Word, the eternal point in *time* through Whom we are saved for ever.

We can still have such experiences in this day and in our time. These two passages

are great examples of gifts given and received in the context of an epiphany. We too, can come to feel the excitement of an encounter with Jesus or the Holy Spirit. Sometimes the message within an experience is hidden when we first get it, but with the help of trusted others, its deeper meaning can be revealed to us through prayer.

Yes, there is work to do, to identify and test its meaning for us, but the Holy Spirit is all about revealing the way and the gift of Christ as He would have it be. The purpose of an epiphany is not just to experience it but to use it to provoke and empower us to do the next thing.

Samuel was woken in the night. Nathanael was challenged by Philip and astounded by Jesus. They were both called into the Lord's service each in different ways. It's important for each of us to always be open to what's going on around us and look proactively at how life is laid out before us on every given day. Where is the Spirit moving? Why have I been placed exactly here at this moment? What is it that I am meant to see and do? How can I best serve my Lord in this moment? Will you, like Samuel and Nathanael and millions of others since "come and see"?

Just in closing, could I encourage you to keep the United States in your prayers this week, as they change over from one president to another? I like the fact that Martin Luther King Day is in the same week that they inaugurate a new president. I hope you might find one of his prayers helpful:

Lord ... We thank you for your church, founded upon your Word, that challenges us to do more than sing and pray, to go out and work as though the very answer to our prayers depended on us and not upon you. Help us to realise that humanity was created to shine like the stars

and live on through all eternity.  
Keep us, we pray, in perfect peace.  
Help us to walk together, pray  
together,  
sing together, and live together  
until that day when all God's  
children  
- Black, White, Red, Brown and  
Yellow -  
will rejoice in one common band of  
humanity  
in the reign of our Lord and of our  
God, we pray. Amen.

*The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.*