

The story we heard from the First Book of Samuel about the elderly prophet Eli and the young child Samuel is a popular account of God's call to an individual.

By way of background, we hear that 'the word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.'

Is that true today? Is the word of the Lord rare? Are visions widespread? I wonder whether I should rephrase those questions: Do we expect to hear God's voice today? Do we expect to receive visions from God today? I wonder...

We hear that Samuel was lying down in the temple, near the ark of God. That would have been like sleeping next to the high altar here in the cathedral. Three times Samuel heard a voice calling his name, 'Samuel, Samuel' and three times he ran to Eli, 'Here I am.' He was obviously willing and eager to serve.

Joy, Fiona, Lorna, Roger, Matt, Richard, Solveig and Lyndon – I know from our last few days together how eager you are to serve.

The young boy Samuel was confused about what was happening when God came to him. He was awake and eager to serve but he didn't recognise the voice of God. In the end, it was the elderly Eli who realised what was happening and guided Samuel in his response to God's call.

Eli told Samuel to stay where he was when the voice next called and to respond, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'

Samuel had not realised that it might be God calling him, for he 'did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.'

I wonder how many people today are being called by God and do not recognise him. If I think back to before I became a Christian in my early twenties I am sure that God tried to call me on several occasions, but I didn't recognise his voice.

In the Introduction to this service the bishop said, 'Deacons are ordained so that the people of God may be better equipped to make Christ known.' So, I urge those of you to be ordained deacon today to continually ask God to help you see his calling on the people you meet. And, I encourage you to reflect on how you will help them to answer his call to make Christ known.

Samuel's response 'Speak, for your servant is listening.' means that the boy was willing to serve God – not just to listen to the words, but to hear and obey them.

So, what did God want Samuel to do?

Samuel was told to tell elderly Eli that God had given Eli the sack because he had not kept his sons in order. Eli knew that his sons were stealing from the offerings the people were bringing to God, and that they were sleeping around, and Eli had not stopped them.

One of the questions the bishop will put to those to be ordained deacon is, 'Will you endeavour to fashion your own life and that of your household according to the way of Christ, that you may be a pattern and example to Christ's people?'

I wonder how you as deacons are going to do that? And I wonder how the members of your family respond to that question?

I find it rather surprising that God would want a young child like Samuel to know about the bad behaviour of the elderly Eli's sons.

I believe that God wants to encourage children and young people.

God knows that they often get frustrated with the church. Children and young people are very perceptive. They observe how adults say one thing – that they love God – and then turn around and do something hurtful to another person.

In effect, God said to Samuel, 'I am going to do something about evil in the church.' There is a very strong message here to all Christians and especially to those of us in leadership in the church.

Do our words and deeds match up? Where is our integrity? Do we allow people to speak and act in hurtful ways to one another? Do we challenge people about their words and behaviour when we should? Do we welcome everyone, regardless of age, gender, wealth, poverty, ethnic background, sexual orientation? Do we love each person equally?

In the Declarations the bishop says, 'Deacons are to proclaim the gospel in word and deed, as agents of God's purposes of love.'

When we are willing and eager to serve, when we are ready to hear and obey God's call, we may not find God's message very comfortable!

And yet, we all want to be called. We all want to be recognised and feel important. We all want to be favoured, to be loved, to be special.

I confess to being a *Strictly* fan. One of the things I appreciated about Bruce Forsyth, was when he whispered to couples who had been harshly criticised by the judges, 'You're my favourite!'

Isn't that what we all want to hear? From our parents, our teachers, our bosses, from God, 'You're my favourite!'

According to the reading from Mark's gospel, the disciples were no different. Once again, we see ourselves in them (and it isn't always a pretty picture). This time, the brothers James and John ask Jesus for special consideration: they want to be his favourites, to be recognized as different and better than the rest of the group.

James and John ask Jesus to let them sit at his right and his left hand 'in your glory.' But Jesus tells them that they do not know what they are asking. And when the other ten disciples finally hear what is going on, they respond right on cue with disgust and derision – just as we do in similar circumstances!

Jesus then tells them all, 'whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.'

In the Introduction to this service the bishop said of deacons, 'Theirs is a life of visible self-giving. Christ is the pattern of their calling and their commission; as he washed the feet of his disciples, so they must wash the feet of others.'

It is wonderful to hear God's voice, to be called to ordained ministry in God's church and the temptation is to believe that because we are called to ordained ministry we are special. However, deacons, priests and bishops are called to a life of self-sacrifice and service after the model of Christ.

It is hard for all of us to hear Jesus' words about servanthood. Not only do we – like the disciples – want to be special, we want to be the best. And we live in a culture that encourages self-promotion, that worships fame, that adores publicity, that only values winning and being 'number one.'

Jesus, as always, calls us to a different way. He calls us to be counter-cultural. He shows us a different way of being, a way that values individuals and their efforts regardless of their attainments, a way that involves self-sacrifice for the benefit of others.

In the Declarations the bishop says that deacons 'are to work with their fellow members in searching out the poor and weak, the sick and lonely and those who are oppressed and powerless, reaching into the forgotten corners of the world, that the love of God may be made visible.'

When we really see each other as unique individuals loved by God, it becomes easier to serve each other; to value each other, encourage each other, recognize each other's gifts, and help each other to live out our individual callings in the world.

It is only when we are free from the desperate need to be the favourite, to be number one, to be in control; it is only when we are free from our fear, that we find our real selves, our real vocation, our real gifts, and our real reward.

The Franciscan Friar Richard Rohr in his book *Radical Grace* writes, 'Gospel people don't need to hang on to anything. For them, the ego is out of the way. They'll make a difference in the world precisely because they don't need to. They don't need to be first, they don't need to be important, they don't need to be number one. They don't need to be rich, secure, popular, so they can do what God has called them to do. They can be obedient, God can move through them with power.'

Joy, Fiona, Lorna, Roger, Matt, Richard, Solveig and Lyndon may you become deacons through whom God can move with power.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.