

The 2nd Sunday of Year B: New Beginnings.

1st Reading: 1 Samuel 3:3b-10+19: the call of the boy Samuel to serve God;

2nd Reading: 1 Corinthians 6:13-15+17-20: Avoiding the sin of fornication;

Gospel: John 1:35-42: Andrew & Simon Peter begin to follow Jesus.

This year, we seem to have lost the first Sunday of the ordinary time! Usually, this is the feast of the Lord's Baptism, but this year, due to the very truncated season of Christmas, we kept that feast last Monday, and then moved immediately to the ordinary "green" time of the Church Year. For the next few weeks, until Lent starts on February 14th, we have this 'ordinary time'; in these weeks, we look at the early part of Jesus' public life. As you may know, Year B is based on St Mark, but as that gospel is so short, we often dip into St John. We do that this weekend, seeing how two disciples came to follow Jesus.

But, before getting there, we have the first reading. This famous story, of how the boy Samuel was called by God, was used in former times to urge boys aged 10 upwards to think of priesthood. When I was at Ushaw College (1965-71), we had the junior seminary there as well; it was in effect a boarding school for lads aged 11-18. The way these boys were 'called' to priesthood was meant to be similar to the call of Samuel, but the story was also used to show how any young person could be 'called' by God for any special purpose. Samuel was in the temple area, near the old priest Eli, when God 'called' him in his sleep. Twice he went to Eli, thinking that the voice was his; the third time, Eli realized that God was calling the lad, so he gave him this familiar advice, that if he heard the voice again, he should say to God: "*Speak Lord, your servant is listening*". This is what happened; the boy became God's servant, later becoming a leader in Israel with various tasks: a mixture of prophet, war-leader and priest. It was he who eventually anointed Saul as the first king, and later repudiated him when he had become deranged. Samuel was one of the great characters of the Old Testament.

The gospel is very different. Far from the usual 'spiritual' atmosphere in St John, we have a practical explanation of how the fisherman Andrew, then his brother Simon Peter, came to follow Jesus. Andrew was one of a pair of disciples of John the Baptist; they were encouraged by John to 'try out' Jesus. They did this, following Jesus to his home at Nazareth. They spent some time with him and were convinced by what they heard. The next day, Andrew met Simon and said, "*We have found the Messiah*", then "*he took Simon to Jesus*". This simple chain of events was to change history. John continues: "*Jesus looked hard at Simon and said: 'You are Simon; you are to be called Cephas' – meaning Rock.*" ('Peter' is from the Greek & Latin words that mean 'rock'.) The important detail is that Andrew merely 'took Simon to Jesus'; he did not try to browbeat him into agreeing with him about Jesus' status; Simon was allowed to make up his own mind. This story explains a feature in the other gospels - why and how these two

tough fishermen suddenly left their boats & nets by the Sea of Galilee and started to go with Jesus, once his public ministry had begun: they already knew him.

The middle reading has a topic that I find difficult to raise in a widely-read on-line sermon: St Paul is discussing fornication, that is, heterosexual intercourse outside of marriage. I urge you to read it; Paul's views are put across strongly: "*Keep away from fornication...other sins are committed outside the body, but to fornicate is to sin against your own body.*" Those of us brought up in an old, strict religious tradition (before about 1970) will think nothing odd about this; younger people, used to a world where sexual liberation is the norm, may think it strangely strict. In the last 50 years, through modern contraception, the formerly strong triangular link between sexual relations, having children and marriage has been broken. I do not wish to go into detail, but I do think that a moral balance must be struck. Pope Francis has said that "sins of the flesh" are not the be-all and end-all of our relationship with God; fine, but few can be happy with our present situation. Immigrants into western Europe are shocked by the casual approach to sex and family life they see here; in other cultures, St Paul's opinion is still seen as correct. A good test is the view of ordinary people about adultery: if sexual acts do not matter morally, why should anyone object if their husband or wife had relations with someone else? The fact is that most people would be upset, because they know instinctively that intercourse is not merely 'harmless fun', but an action with serious emotional and moral implications. That is what Paul meant.

To try to link this middle reading with the other two (about being 'called' to follow God or his Son) is not easy, but neither is it impossible. One area that does link them is our human conscience – that is, you and I judging morally what we do, say and even think. Whatever our role in life, we all have some sort of 'conscience' about how we conduct it: How do I treat others? How much self-control do I have? Do I see others as objects of pleasure for me, or do I value their right to self-esteem as much as I do my own? Do I honestly try my best?

I suggest that (like young Samuel) we say, "Speak Lord; your servant is listening". But listening to what? We all (especially the young) need to be able to tell the difference between good and bad influences, as they have a big effect on success or failure in life. We need to be honest about our gifts & talents: How does God want me to use them? What things can I do that many others cannot? Are there people whom I can reach, but whom others cannot? And so on. As we think of these things, let us try to pray each day. We are all different, but God can use each of us for something specific. As an old friend said in a school assembly about 40 years ago, the important thing is not to think we have to be a super person, but just to try to do ordinary things extraordinarily well. *Fr Jim Dunne.*