

KNOWN INSIDE OUT

1 Samuel 3:1-10

Psalm 139

John 1:43-51

When I was growing up, I had my own code for evaluating the various adults with whom I came into contact. If you think in terms of marks out of ten, I gave fewest marks, *nil points* to those who met me once or twice but forgot that our paths had ever crossed. I may say that now that I'm older myself I'm a bit more forgiving that way, although there was one minister, head of a big multi-staff church in Chicago, who used to annoy me by introducing himself every time we met in his church's corridors - even though I was on that staff, working in the basement, with the homeless.

Garnering just a few more points, but not many - 1 or 2 - were those who remembered that I was "One of the Candlish girls", and joked about not knowing which (there were only two of us, and we didn't look alike, so it wasn't that hard!) Marginally better - perhaps 3 points were those who at least tried to address me by name - even if they got my mother or sister's name - or sometimes a name that had no connection with me at all. Much further up the scale on 7 points were those who remembered my name. Better still were those who knew me, not only by name, but by who I was. Those were the ones who took a genuine interest. They wouldn't get confused and ask after my piano playing (my siblings played, I did not), or assume I was at some other stage in education than I was. They would remember what they knew about me because I mattered to them. These few (mainly family, but not only family) were the ten pointers, and the people I could trust.

In our first reading today we have seen that God knew Samuel by name. This may have been a surprise to Samuel, but if we read the whole story it can be no surprise to us. God knows Samuel from before his conception. He knows him from the time of his mother's distress, her prayers for a child, and her promise that if she is given a child, she will dedicate him to God. God knows Samuel by name, all right.

And so God calls Samuel by name, and while that calling is all that we read of the story, that's not all that happened. God wasn't calling Samuel just to give him a warm fuzzy that God knew him personally. He was calling him by name to give him a message, and not a happy message, for Eli the priest. It was a message that would affect the whole nation of Israel.

Why should God give such an important message to a boy? Why not speak to Eli direct? After all, he must have known him by name too. The answer to that is found in our Psalm, Psalm 139. As we sing that we realise that God knows more, far more, than our name.

Sing Hymn 97 *O God, you search me and you know me* (Psalm 139)

God's knowledge extends to far more than our names. God knows us better than that. He knows our words and our thoughts, before we do and remembers them better than we do ourselves. He knows what we mean when we're not sure ourselves, and he can discern the various strands that go into our very mixed motives. God knows us.

It was because God knew Samuel, not just the boy, but the longed-for baby, the dedicated infant, and the mighty prophet and judge who he was to become, that God gave him, not Eli, the message. He knew that Samuel was going to have many such messages to bring to people, many prophetic deeds to enact. He knew, though Samuel did not, that he was capable of doing this thing, of speaking this message.

God knows our capabilities too. Better than we do ourselves. That's why so often life in his family is a challenging matter, because he made us with these capabilities and like a good Father, he wants to make sure that we live up to what he knows we are capable of! If you have a prompting that God is asking something of you that you would rather not do, there is no point of saying "I can't." God knows full well just what you really can or can't do, and he won't ask anything of you that is really in your "can't zone": but he is very good at asking things of you that are just not in your comfort zone.

I know what I am talking about. If it were all about comfort zones then I would certainly never have become a minister! But when you allow God to lead you despite inner misgivings it is amazing how he proves himself right about what we can do, how he proves that he knows us better than we do ourselves. Samuel was spoken to by name, given a difficult message to pass on, and acquitted himself well, inaugurating a period of change in Israel's history.

Since God knows us so well, he doesn't approach each of us in the same way. And so our third Scripture tell us.

Read John 1: 43-51

This is a strange little encounter, this meeting of Jesus and Nathanael. Commentators have analysed it and torn it to pieces and they usually conclude that Jesus is showing his secret knowledge of people, but that it is a strange encounter all the same. But the more I read this, the more I think that Jesus is showing, not secret knowledge, but quick-witted insight in his dealings with Nathanael.

Nathanael, as we know from the end of John's gospel (John 21:2) is from Cana in Galilee. That probably means very little to you, unless you remember that this is where the water was turned to wine. But if you consult the maps found at the end of most Bibles you will see that it was only about 10 miles from Nazareth. The two places were about as far apart as Heriot and Stow. Proximity often breeds contempt. When I was growing up in Kingskettle, in central Fife, it was the neighbours in Ladybank who were our unthinking, unquestioning enemies. At inter-school or inter-Guide or inter-anything events, we didn't care who beat us so long as we beat Ladybank, and they felt just the same way about us.

Here in this parish I have seen some of that half-serious, half-joking rivalry between Heriot and Stow - and not just at childish levels, either.

Something of this is surely at the back of Nathanael's mind when Philip comes to him and says "We have found the person Moses and the prophets have spoken about, Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth."

Nathanael is a jester, a joker. He is sharp-witted and quick to quip. It's not that he isn't interested, but quick as a flash he has to answer Philip: "Nazareth! Can anything good come from Nazareth!?" But Philip knows his friend so he pays no notice to his sarcasm and invites him to come and see. So Nathanael follows.

Jesus greets him and shows at once that he has taken the measure of the man, for he greets him, "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is no guile!" Now that's a barbed and caustic comment if ever there was one. If you remember back to the story of Jacob - who was re-named Israel - you will remember that he was never one to be noted for straight dealings with others. He cheated his brother of birthright and blessing, he cheated his uncle of the best sheep and goats in his flock. On one famous occasion he wrestled with God literally; but throughout his life he wrestled with God figuratively, seeking his own way, his own advantage and called back time and again

to remember that God was in control. A true son of Israel, a true Israelite would like it to be thought that he was without guile, but only because he was hiding his real self.

So Jesus' greeting is double-edge, and I expect was pronounced with a great big grin. Nathanael answers in like tone: "Where did you get to know me?" And Jesus says "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Where was this fig tree? It may only have been across the street. Commentators tend to think that it must have been out of sight if Jesus' answer is to impress Nathanael, but if all this is spoken in truthful jest, then there is no need to assume this. We aren't usually given to understand that Jesus, in his earthly limitations, could see around corners.

Now we get the remarkable response from Nathanael, but you know I still hear him as being a little sarcastic. You saw me under the tree, oh well then, "You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Philip had claimed that Jesus was the one promised by the prophets, but Nathanael decides to go one better than his friend. Does he really mean what he is saying? Probably not. It's all a big joke.

And Jesus says "Do you believe because I said that I saw you under the fig tree?" He knows perfectly well that Nathanael is joshing with him, is curious but sceptical, and he turns the joke back on Nathanael. "But you will see greater things than this.... You will see heaven opened and the angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

Jesus knows his man. He knows that the way to deal with Nathanael is not by being too serious, but to meet him where he is, in his scepticism and levity. But he is still in charge of the conversation. It's still not just a social moment, but a conversation with a purpose.

However God knows us: by name, by potential, by character, there is always a purpose to his knowledge. God's coming to us and calling us by name, by character, is always just the beginning. For Samuel it was the beginning of his life as a prophet, a mouthpiece for God. For Nathanael it was the beginning of a life-time as a disciple of Christ. Both of them would be witness to God's power in the world and out of this world, would see amazing things which would fill them with wonder and drive them to new levels of commitment.

We too are called by our names. We are named at our baptism, and we are known to God, not just by a ticket, or by a card in his files, but as real, complete people, with past and present and all sorts of potential for the future. It is to the people that he knows that God speaks, to each of us in the way that we can hear. But with God it's never just a social visit. There is always that same purpose, to challenge us, to call us onwards to help us fulfil the potential that we'd rather not know we have. God calls us to move forward with him. Are we prepared to say "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening"?