

## SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME - JANUARY 15, 2006 - BLESSED SACRAMENT

The two related scriptural texts today are about divine calls: the call of the great Israelite leader Samuel and the call of the two disciples of Jesus.

Samuel's call comes to him in his sleep. I love the explanation of why Samuel thought that his name had been called by Eli: "At that time Samuel was not familiar with the Lord, because the Lord had not revealed anything to him as yet." There is a kind of apprenticeship, it seems, in discerning the call of God. God was calling him before he knew that it was God who was calling him. Something for us to keep in mind, perhaps.

The disciples respond to the Baptist's proclamation that Jesus is the Lamb of God, and begin to follow him; they seem to be on the way to becoming disciples before Jesus is even aware of it: "What are you seeking?" he asks them, and they ask simply: "Where are you staying, rabbi?" And now they are invited: "Come and see." And John's Gospel will illustrate how it was by staying with him that they would eventually come to know even what they had been seeking, perhaps without really knowing it, in the first place.

We may be inclined to think of divine calls as something that happens only to the great religious figures, to a Samuel or an Andrew or Peter; or perhaps we think that "vocations," as they are called, come only to priests and to religious. This view may itself depend on the idea that, apart from such exceptional people, God works only on a grand plan, with humanity in general, or with the Church as a whole, and with no special care for individuals, for oneself. John Henry Newman was particularly conscious of these tendencies and against them he preached a sermon entitled, "A Particular Providence as Revealed in the Gospel." In it there is a passage which beautifully states the point he wished to make:

God beholds thee individually, whoever thou art. He "calls thee by thy name." He sees thee, and understands thee, as He made thee. He knows what is in thee, all thy own peculiar feelings and thoughts, thy dispositions and likings, thy strength and thy weakness. He views thee in thy day of rejoicing, and thy day of sorrow. He sympathises in thy hopes and thy temptations. He interests Himself in all thy anxieties and remembrances, all the risings and fallings of thy spirit. He has numbered the very hairs of thy head and the cubits of thy stature. He compasses thee round and bears thee in his arms; He takes thee up and sets thee down. He notes thy very countenance, whether smiling or in tears, whether healthful or sickly. He looks tenderly upon thy hands and thy feet; He hears thy voice, the beating of thy heart, and thy very breathing. Thou dost not love thyself better than He loves thee. (*Parochial and Plain Sermons*, III, 124-25)

This sense of the infinite value of the individual because of God's love for him Newman carried with him when he became a Catholic. He has a famous meditation in which he articulates how this particular providence translates into a particular call. He speaks for every person when he says:

God has created me to do Him some definite service; He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission—I never may know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next. Somehow I am necessary for His

purposes, as necessary in my place as an Archangel in his—if, indeed, I fail, He can raise another, as He could make the stones children of Abraham. Yet I have a part in this great work; I am a link in a chain, a bond of connexion between persons. He has not created me for naught. I shall do good, I shall do His work; I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place, while not intending it, if I do but keep His commandments and serve Him in my calling.

Therefore I will trust Him. Whatever, wherever I am, I can never be thrown away. If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve Him; in perplexity, my perplexity may serve Him; if I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve Him. My sickness, or perplexity, or sorrow may be necessary causes of some great end, which is quite beyond us. He does nothing in vain; He may prolong my life, He may shorten it; He knows what He is about. He may take away my friends, He may throw me among strangers, He may make me feel desolate, make my spirits sink, hide the future from me—still He knows what He is about.

Even while speaking of the calling of great men like Samuel and the two apostles, today's biblical texts should move us to inquire whether God is calling us to some work—or, rather, not whether he is, but what it is that he calls us to. Samuel had to learn how to discern God's voice from Eli's, and it may be that we will have to learn how to discern what God requires of us, or to recognize his voice even in the familiarity of our homes, our occupations, our neighborhoods. It would go some way toward becoming "familiar with the Lord" if we were to make our own Samuel's prayer at the end of today's reading: "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening."

Similarly, if we were to allow Christ to ask us every once in a while: "What are you looking for?", we could be moved to inquire where in fact we are heading, what search our lives are defining, what goals they are pursuing, and to ask ourselves whether these are the goals, this the direction we really ought to be pursuing.

If we were to ask occasionally, even daily, "Lord, show me what you wish me to be, to become, to do," it could very well be that we would discern calls that now escape our notice, find that our everyday existence as parents, as spouses, as employers or employees, in youth or maturity or old age, has opportunities by which the special, the unique mission, service, that God asks of each of us can be fulfilled.