

Address given at a Vocations Fair

You might have heard the story of the wealthy man who enjoyed showing off his wealth and power to his friends and colleagues. He had a huge house, large grounds and a superb indoor swimming pool in which he kept his pet alligator.

One day, showing his friends his home he arrived at the pool with 3 friends and joking with them he said if anyone dared dive in the pool and swim to the other end he'd give his home to them or half his fortune, or even the hand of his beautiful daughter in marriage — and the group chuckled to each other and then “SPLASH” — in one of the guys dived and frantically started towards the other side of the pool. He just made it as the jaws of the alligator snapped shut, just catching his trouser leg as he got out of the water. All the group applauded him, even the owner of the house saying no one had dared to do what he did.

So what do you want? The house? No — I've got a nice home of my own. Half my fortune? No I'm OK as I am.

So it must be my beautiful daughter? No I'm engaged to be married to the most wonderful woman.

“Well what do you want then?”

I want to get my hands on the guy that pushed me in!

It's a silly story really but it's got a couple of simple truths about discovering vocation that may pertain to our lives as we think about them:

- Sometimes it takes a push from others to get us started.
- It's only when we're in the water we discover what we're capable of.

So I wonder why you're here this morning; perhaps a nagging, gnawing, inner conviction has pushed you to try and discover what you should be doing with your life; or perhaps you've been given a push by someone and you're being stretched.

I want to start by asking a question to all of us here.

Who are you? **What's your primary identity?**

I might describe myself as a white, male Anglo-Saxon, middle class father of two, husband of one, grandfather from Lancashire who was a teacher, now a minister and synod moderator in the United Reformed Church, and you will have got a picture, a **snapshot** of my life. It's a snapshot based on colour, gender, ethnicity, class role, geography, profession, vocation and family identity. If I had time I would ask you to do the same exercise and it might reveal quite a bit about you.

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But I haven't told you what I consider to be my primary identity.

I believe as profoundly as I am able that I am a **"CHILD OF GOD."**

Now I choose to say that, rather than I'm a child of the universe, and that is a statement of faith because I have come to believe, to know the God who is like Jesus.

So in my better moments I believe, and say that this is my primary identity. In my "worse" moments other identities can predominate!

But I am a child of God now, in the first decade of the 21st century in what has been described by one politician as **"Broken Britain"** a country with highest rate of single parent families in the western world; Where children in some communities are described as "feral" and uncontrollable; Where addictions to drugs, alcohol, sex and shopping mark out our culture; And society, in the words of one theologian, Marcus Borg, is dominated by the 3 "A's" — achievement, appearance and affluence.

This is our culture, our society and we're all caught up in it — even those who profess a faith in a Jesus, who is radically counter cultural.

Well all that's a preamble to saying a few words about our Bible reading this morning — the passage which is known as the call of Samuel.

1. We can't say that Israel was a broken nation at the time of Samuel. It wasn't even a nation, just a collection of tribes linked in a loose kind of federation and bound together by the story of deliverance from oppression in Egypt. But it seems like a pretty chaotic social milieu in to which Samuel was born. One of the holy sites, Shiloh did have a priest, Eli. He seemed like a decent sort of priest but his sons were shameless, corrupt and corrupting. The tribes were surrounded by enemies who sought to destroy them and we're told the "word of the Lord was rare" and there was no frequent vision".

It seemed like a **pretty broken place**, at least religiously, morally and politically.

And at this time God calls a young boy, and the writer says in a delightful phrase:

"The lamp of the Lord had not yet gone out."

These words reminded me of something our current General Secretary said, soon after her appointment **"I don't think God has finished with the URC yet."**

I don't know if any of you here ever get "down." I don't mean depressed in a clinical sort of way but have feelings of despair at the way things are going in the church and in our society. Whenever I'm inclined to feel like that I'm reminded of another OT story of **Elijah** when he goes

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into a cave and wants to die and says “There is only me left. I’ve done all I can.” And the writer of 1 Kings tells us that God says “OK, you’ve had your moan. There’s a job for you to do. I’ve got some people for you to anoint as kings and prophets, and by the way, there are another 7,000 people who are loyal to me.

As a synod moderator, I’ve seen enough life, faith and hope in ordinary URC Christians to say “The lamp of the Lord hasn’t gone out yet.”

He may also be saying “There are other people I am calling even now.”

2. Who was Samuel? Well he was Hannah and Elkanah’s son, conceived after a time of barrenness, long before in vitro fertilisation. Yes he came through Hannah and Elkanah, but not from them.

Just as the eastern mystic Kahlil Gibran wrote in the last century, **“Our children come through us, not from us.”**

Ultimately, and primarily, we are children of God, and once we become aware of that primary identity, showing the family likeness, understanding who and whose we are, begins to shape our thinking and affects our choices, and discernment of the future that our Creator might want for us..

But it is not straightforward. Few of us hear audible voices like those we read of in the Old and sometimes New Testaments. I wish God had spoken to me as clearly as he had spoken to Samuel. I might have skipped 9 years of teaching and gone straight into ministry.

But perhaps not. Just as it took time for Samuel’s call to be discerned, so it often takes time for us to hear.

And note, he didn’t hear, or rather he didn’t interpret what was going on in his life very well. I don’t doubt that some of you are here because you’ve “heard” something, that inner nagging, or conviction, but you’re not clear what it is about.

Well notice Samuel, the one who was to be a great a prophet needed the help of an **old man** to help him. And so might we! And I suppose that today you might find the odd old man, or woman hanging around here to listen to your story. Or maybe you’ve already found that someone who has said to you “it may be the Lord who is calling.”

For me it was a man called Sid, who allied with my feeling I could do better than my minister (I was a bit arrogant), was instrumental in me discovering my vocation.

3. We can’t prescribe God’s call. We often don’t fully know to what we are being called. There isn’t any one pattern:

- * the inner conviction that won’t go away;
- * the push into a situation which we would never have chosen but in which we find we are swimming well;

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- * a need we see that we begin to feel passionate about;
 - * a sense that we are not fulfilling our potential as a child of God;
- ... And so much more.

And of course, we might be **wrong**. Lots of people feel called to be and do things for which they are unsuitable.

Jeremiah said “The heart is deceitful above all things”. We can easily deceive ourselves, and NOT deliberately. That is why the ordination service has the question:

“Are zeal for the glory of God, love for the Lord Jesus Christ, and a desire for salvation of all people, **AS FAR AS YOU KNOW YOUR OWN HEART**, the chief motives which lead you to enter this ministry?”

I spoke to my predecessor recently and told him I was coming to this Vocations Conference. He said he’d heard that there were a decent number of enquirers which was encouraging, but then he said, “There always are in a recession.”

“As far as you know your own heart.”

But I don’t want to finish on a negative note. Finding your vocation is one of the best things in life. In the long run it’s probably as good as sex!

And it is a wonderful privilege, and a humbling one, when we are able to respond to whatever God might be saying to us with the words of Samuel. “Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.”

I guess I should finish there. But the text demands one more comment. Samuel’s task wasn’t easy.

His first task was to tell Eli the truth about his priesthood and the way his family had betrayed God’s call. I don’t think Christian ministry, in all its forms, is easy. It wasn’t for Jesus, so why should it be for us?

The Methodist Covenant service puts it like this:

Christ has many services to be done.

Some are easy, others are difficult;

Some bring honour, others bring reproach.

Some are suitable to our natural inclinations and material interests,

Others are contrary to both;

In some we may please Christ and please ourselves.

In other we cannot please Christ except by denying ourselves.

Yet the power to do all these things is given to us in Christ, who strengthens us.

I think that is one of the things that Methodists have got right.

I hope, if you’ve had the push into the water, either internally or externally, you’ll discover your potential and God’s potential in you, in whatever vocation you are called to fulfil.