

Called By Name

“I have called you by your name; you are mine.” Remembering people’s names — what a problem this can be; even with the best of intentions, even when we are really interested in someone and recall the actual person, the name eludes us. So many methods of mnemonic are advised and tried, just to avoid the disappointing admission, “Sorry, but I just can’t remember your name.” Every man and woman (and child!) like to be recognized by name; when others forget, it is a blow to our personhood.

God knows each individual by name totally, intimately, always. None of us is ever ignored by him; like the birds of the air, and all created things, we are forever in God’s mind, under his care (cf. Mat. 10:29.) Even the person of no particular significance in his neighbor’s eyes, the born loser who lives in the shadows of depression most of the time — even he (or she) is precious in the eyes of God, perhaps more precious than anyone can suspect.

Samuel stands for all the little, forgotten people. Just a boy, with no high illusions about himself, a servant and apprentice to the old man Eli; he slept at night in a little room like an altar-boys’ sacristy, at the religious shrine of Israel. Suddenly, in the middle of the night, he heard God calling him by name; eventually Samuel recognizes that the call is from God, and not just from the priest, so he submits himself heart and soul to listen to God’s word. Only then did Samuel discover his own potential, his new identity, the role he was to fulfil in life.

Some of us may feel a strong, but quite false, sense of our own identity. Our self-understanding derives too exclusively from our own achievements, failures, efforts, and ambitions; God’s plan for us hardly enters the picture at all or we dismiss it as too uncertain, too “spiritual” and remote from daily life. Biblical faith, on the contrary, insists that God calls us into relationship with himself on a day-to-day basis, always offering us life, and always making demands on us to live our life worthily in his sight. Called by name. For Christians, specifically, it is relationship with Christ our Lord that lies at the heart of our identity. Not only are we called by name to friendship with Jesus — we become “members of his body,” sharers in his spirit. Sometimes, in prayer we can taste the rich privilege of belonging to Christ. More often, it is in the darkness of faith that we simply believe in it. But always, and in ordinary details of behavior, we are called to live up to the standard of love and truth set by the Spirit of Jesus. That is our real Christian vocation; and only by trying to live that vocation are we worthy of our name.

Later, we all hope, we will discover our full identity in God’s presence, when this life is over, and he calls us by name into the next life. Like the two apostles who wanted to know Christ better, we will be invited to “Come and see.”