

# HEARING THE CALL



# HEARING THE CALL

*Stories of young vocation*



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Gordon Mursell



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*AMDG  
and in deep gratitude  
to those who have shared their stories  
of discerning God's will with us*

## Foreword

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Quite often when people say ‘God has a purpose for your life’, it’s supposed to be reassuring. Second thoughts may suggest, though, that it’s anything but. Most of us rebel at the idea that someone else has written a script we have to perform – and actually, if that’s how we think of God’s purposes, we’re right to rebel. But the hard thing to grasp is that, because God has made us and invested the most costly kind of love in our lives, God understands more than we ever can or shall about what really makes us flourish, indeed, what makes us *real*. So his purpose is always, simply, to make us real, so that we may have the sort of joy nothing can take away. When he opens a door (or sometimes pushes you straight through one), it’s his way of saying, ‘You could be more than you realize, the world is bigger and stranger than you ever thought.’

A ‘vocation’ isn’t some weird and unusual thing: it’s just the way in which we (all of us) recognize all this. God wants to move us on towards reality, honesty and fullness of life; and from time to time, we get a deepened sense of how he’s at work and where he’s inviting us to discover this. It doesn’t take long to realize that these invitations are likely to take us well beyond our comfort zones – just because we’re all of us used to seeing less of ourselves than is really there. We sense, somehow, that we’re being prodded into territory that is strange and not at all safe, even though we recognize at the same time that there’s something about it that really matters to us and for us.

So no – ‘reassuring’ isn’t the word. But talking about God’s purpose and God’s calling to us, about ‘vocation’, turns out to be something to do with growing in ways we couldn’t have expected. One of the real strengths of this very good book is that it sets out lots of stories about how this sense of being

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invited into new territory can feel. It is very honest about the fact that people may react with anger or blind panic to such invitations; just as some react with a sense of ‘so *that’s* it’, with joy and gratitude. Equally real and equally important responses: what matters is to let the response be truthful and then to take the next step in trust.

In the last few years, the Church of England has been underlining the importance of encouraging younger people to open up to God’s invitation at a deeper level. Sometimes the Church in recent decades has been a bit uncertain about recognizing vocations to priesthood or other sorts of dedicated Christian life at a young age. But I think we’ve all been the losers from this; and we’re beginning to do better.

In this book, you’ll find a readiness to start from where you are, to take your experience of faith and trust seriously, and to offer some resources and a bit of a framework to make fuller sense of it. I hope and pray that, as you read it, you’ll catch a bit of the excitement there is in recognizing these moments of opening up and new possibility. This is the excitement of knowing that God may be prompting you to discover who you most truly are in and through serving the Christian family in ordained ministry or some other lifelong commitment of prayer and love. May the God who longs for our joy bring his Presence alive for you in these pages.

Rowan Williams  
Magdalene College, Cambridge

# Introduction



At the core of this book is an invitation to listen to what God is calling us to be. It is the authors' understanding that all human beings have a vocation and that it is no greater to be called to ordination than to serve God in any other way. However, although *Hearing the Call* is intended to benefit anyone hoping to discover God's will for them, it will be particularly helpful to young people trying to discern if they are called to be ordained – and the laity and clergy who will be involved in supporting, encouraging and nurturing them.

Each chapter of the book begins with a biblical story of someone being called by God. Jonathan Lawson, whose ministry at the University of Durham involves listening to and supporting those who are discerning their vocation, then reflects on his experience of discernment with young people in relation to the passage in question. In the 'Reflection' section that follows, Gordon Mursell explores what this biblical passage might mean in a broader context, drawing out its message for the world and for us today.

As such the book tries to mirror what it is about: learning how to listen to what God is calling us to be. How do we discern God's purpose for us? How do we hear his call? That's what we're about to explore.



# 1

## *Hearing the call*

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Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.

At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was. Then the LORD called, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ and he said, ‘Here I am!’ and ran to Eli, and said, ‘Here I am, for you called me.’ But he said, ‘I did not call; lie down again.’ So he went and lay down. The LORD called again, ‘Samuel!’ Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, ‘Here I am, for you called me.’ But he said, ‘I did not call, my son; lie down again.’ Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. The LORD called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, ‘Here I am, for you called me.’ Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, ‘Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, “Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.”’ So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ And Samuel said, ‘Speak, for your servant is listening.’ Then the LORD said to Samuel, ‘See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. On that day I will fulfil against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning

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to end. For I have told him that I am about to punish his house for ever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering for ever.'

Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the LORD. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. But Eli called Samuel and said, 'Samuel, my son.' He said, 'Here I am.' Eli said, 'What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you.' So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, 'It is the LORD; let him do what seems good to him.'

As Samuel grew up, the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the LORD. (1 Samuel 3.1–20)

I, Jonathan, grew up in a prosperous part of south-east Surrey, and from early childhood went to church with my family. I starred in some nativity plays, was helped to project my voice by my Sunday school teacher who had trained at RADA (surely that can only happen in Surrey), sang in the church choir, learned to bellring as my father had done before me, and later became a server. At my preparatory school I had an enthusiastic religious education teacher who ran a Scripture Union group, which I attended; later I became a sacristan, looked after the chapel, and from my own motivation cleaned the brasses and rebound the hymn books.

Until recently I looked back on this part of my life with some embarrassment, wondering how I could have been so pious from such an early age. But more recently I have learned to honour and respect this part of my faith journey. I can see now with hindsight that God was stirring a sense of call in me to serve him. It is quite common to see only in retrospect what

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God has been up to, but it might be worth reflecting on what has drawn you to read this book. Is God gently nudging you towards something? Do you feel that you might be meant to be more than you are now?

The realization that God had been guiding me towards ordination from childhood became more explicit for me through a conversation with a potential ordinand here at Durham. By talking about his early sense of vocation, he brought alive in me what God had been doing when I was young: something I hadn't really noticed so clearly before.

I think it is interesting to observe that with the call of Samuel, the nearly blind Eli helps the young, clear-sighted Samuel to see something he cannot see, while Samuel has the unenviable task of showing Eli something he has failed to grasp. Discernment is like a dance: both parties participate and both are changed by the exchange. It is, I believe, essential that anyone who is ministering in the work of discernment continues to strive towards understanding God's call for them personally. None of us has this all 'sorted', and the discernment of God's will for us is a lifelong journey.

But back to the Durham conversation. It became very clear that this individual had a call that had been waiting to be recognized for many years, and hearing his story seemed close to a mystical experience. As a boy, he had felt that he wished to serve God, and this feeling had become particularly intense at school. As he described longing to be close to Christ, our conversation had such a charge to it that I felt as though the door of his soul were open and I was glimpsing the glory of God. I can describe it in no other way. There was an incredibly strong sense that he needed someone to hear what he had been aware of for such a long time: a deep desire to love and serve God.

This experience led me to two profound reflections. First, that vocation is very often (though not always) there from an early age. I can recognize in my own unarticulated sense of call as a small boy an experience of being drawn to serve

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God. Which is why I love the story of the call of Samuel: that boy serving God in the Temple powerfully echoes what I went through myself. My second reflection is on the importance of a call being heard. Now on one level this seems blindingly obvious. But as any good listener knows, we can sometimes only 'hear' things when they have been received by another – when they have been externalized, said out aloud. It is therefore a really important prerequisite if you are considering your sense of vocation that you talk to someone you trust, who will take seriously and handle sensitively what you tell them. Hearing someone talk about their sense of vocation, particularly for the first time, is like receiving a precious and fragile gift, one that deserves to be accepted with gratitude and respect.

For some individuals, there may be no thread of God's call through childhood to follow; rather, they experience a dramatic awakening. One member of our vocation group simply woke up one day when she was 17 and said to her father: 'I'm going to be a priest.' They talked about this with other members of the family, one of whom quite wisely suggested that she start going to church. So excitedly she went: she walked through the door of the church and said with great eagerness to a member of the congregation: 'I'm going to be a priest.'

'We don't believe in that here,' was the response. The Church of England has within its membership people with differing views on the ordination of women to the priesthood, but it is worth noticing the effect this had on the 17-year-old. She didn't speak about entering the priesthood again until she went to university.

Here is what another member of the Durham University Group, Peter Garvie, who is now a priest, has written about his own vocational journey:

The idea that God works within creation and within our lives was something that was completely foreign to me. I had had a good education, felt I had a moral compass, and would have perhaps even described myself as a Christian. That was it, I went off to

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university in Birmingham to study business studies and 'I' was in control. 'I' was deciding my own future. God put an end to that. And this is why the mystery of the individual vocation is so unfathomable to me; for myself, I didn't have my vocation immediately recognized by other Christians at church, God didn't physically or audibly appear to me and say, 'I want you to do this'. It is something far more subtle and difficult to understand, something that is still going on now, I believe for each of us. When I was 19 I opened up a Gideon Bible that was in my room at university and started reading the Psalms. Here I found psalms, some of which have been written by someone who has allowed themselves to be completely open and honest before God, and I wanted to do the same. An important moment for me was reading the beginning of the 37th Psalm: 'I will put my trust in the Lord, and he will give me my heart's desire.' At the time that certainly did not mean the ministerial priesthood, but it did mean coming to realize the reality of my own baptism and being guided by my own faith. I was confirmed and became a regular communicant, and the church became the place where I could pray, be loved and receive communion as I worked out 'with fear and trembling' my own vocation. This took me on an amazing journey: I left university in Birmingham and worked alongside young adults with severe learning disabilities, supporting them to live as independently as possible, I challenged myself, went travelling on my own, and read a lot of books. Eventually I was convinced to go back to university to study Theology, where I enjoyed a very formative three years at Durham. And my vocation to the priesthood began to be articulated in ways I could handle; for me it was more like an intuition, a gentle nagging that said, 'You need to find out more about this'. My college chaplain was very understanding and suggested ways of finding out more about whether this ministry was for me. I went to an inner-city church for Holy Week and found myself looking at other priests and saying to God, 'Is this realistically something I could do?' To help answer that question, and to get some more experience, I spent a year in

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London working for a church in a challenging area, living in a community with three other people in a similar stage of discernment to me. The role included pastoral church work, especially working with some of the church's neediest people, often on the fringes, as well as coordinating a night shelter for the homeless. All this was valuable experience I continue to rely on today. It was during this time that with the help and support of my sending diocese I went to a diocesan selection conference and then to a Bishops' Advisory Panel, and so began my time at seminary, which was where the journey of real discernment began . . .

Taking anyone's sense of vocation seriously is of the utmost importance. For young people, such a sense is often on the cusp of consciousness, as are so many things when we are young. It takes grace to notice a call, and the moment of potentially bringing it to birth in words is both exciting and precarious. Imagine if Eli had told Samuel to go away and get some sleep? What if he had just not taken him seriously?

Yes, a call needs to be heard, and it often requires another to help with the hearing of it. Bringing anything out into the open for the first time is likely to involve fear of rejection, of not being understood or of not being accepted, so these first conversations are vital. If a negative response is perceived by someone experiencing God's call to ordained ministry, they may not speak about their vocation again for years. It can make all the difference between being ordained at twenty-something or much later in life. An old university friend said to me once that if there had been someone working with young vocations when she was at university, she might have been ordained a couple of decades earlier. It is also worth noting that the 'process' itself is part of the 'hearing' experience. It is a common complaint from candidates (particularly young candidates) to feel that they are not being heard or taken seriously, as they have had little or no contact with the person who is supporting them through the process. The 'unsaid' then becomes as important

as the 'said'. I find that candidates often want to have at least a sense of the landscape of the discernment process, so that they can navigate it, and know that they are still being taken seriously. This book is in part trying to provide just that.

The discernment of young vocations and the encouragement of the discernment of young vocations is an important matter for the Church. For many years there was a culture whereby young adults who had a strong sense of call were sent away to get some 'life experience'. The Church of England has since come to realize the detrimental effect this has had on the numbers of young people coming forward for ordination, and although those numbers have now begun to increase, it seems that a change in culture within the Church is still required. I suspect we need to think about how we portray the life of a priest to young people (it being particularly important that they have good role models – not seemingly perfect priests, but priests who reflect that their vocation has brought them to life); to use the language of discernment more; and to develop greater sensitivity to the fact that God can and does call some people to ordained ministry from an early age. We should celebrate that fact. It is a good thing to have young priests! It is good to have older ones too!

During the school years, a sense of vocation may simply be something to observe, rejoice in and pray about. When someone reaches their late teens or early twenties, however, my experience tells me that it can be appropriate to ask: 'Have you thought about ordination?' In fact I believe it is really important to articulate that question sometimes. A student who was in our chapel choir so clearly had a sense of call to ordination that in his third week here as an undergraduate I asked him if he was going to be a priest: two years later he came back to discuss this with me. Recently he has been recommended for ordination training. He now says that, in retrospect, my asking if he had a vocation to ordained ministry was very important. It planted a seed. It opened up a vista – a horizon of possibility. Obviously this asking needs to be done with caution,

thoughtfulness and prayer. I'm not suggesting asking every single person. However, as a naturally shy individual myself, I have learned that some precociousness is important when it comes to encouraging young vocations.

My favourite example of that precociousness was with a third-year undergraduate who went to choral evensong in Durham Cathedral almost every day. I took some soundings from the clergy at the Cathedral, and then one day I chatted to him and said: 'You come to evensong far too often. You're clearly going to be ordained. If you're going to be ordained you need to see me.' I gave him my card. A few weeks later he got in touch. Within a few months he was on placement in a set of parishes in London for a year, and now he is training to be ordained. Such precociousness is a risk and takes some courage, but it's often worth a try.

In Durham we, like other university chaplaincies, run a University Vocations Group. It is nothing grand. Often we just meet in the pub. Sometimes we have a speaker. Sometimes we watch a film. Sometimes we visit a particular project or parish. But my strong suspicion is that the most important work the group does is to meet. For in doing so, young people realize that other young people feel something similar to them. They are not alone. They are not crazy. Just knowing this helps them to take God's call more seriously. So if you can, find another young person who is thinking about ordination. If you cannot locate anyone locally, you might get in touch with your 'Young Vocations Champion' in the diocese, or use the 'Call Waiting' website to find out about young vocations events, where you'll meet lots of other young people thinking about ordination. They exist: you just need to find them!

In the vocations group here in Durham, we sometimes discuss the age people were when they felt called to ordination. One of the group remarked that she had been baptizing her teddy bears at the age of three! I am certainly not suggesting that children are bought Action Men to be dressed up as priests, nor that books are written on 'how to be a priest' aimed at the

under-fives. But just as ‘Godly play’ tries to help children begin to learn how to handle sacred texts from an early age, so I think we could pay more attention in the Church to how we help young individuals discern God’s will for them. This might be as simple as doing what Eli did for Samuel, and sending them back with a new understanding of how to listen to God.

### *Reflection*

It’s an extraordinary thought that God might be calling people, and opening up new possibilities for them, before they even know who or what God is. Faith will be essential if that call is to be accepted and followed, but it is not a prerequisite of being called. God has plans and hopes for the most fervent agnostics and sceptics, if only they knew it. At least this, in effect, is what the Bible tells us, and nowhere more graphically than in the story of the call of Samuel.<sup>1</sup>

The account, in the First Book of Samuel, took place while Samuel was still a boy (1 Sam. 3.1), and at a time when ‘Samuel did not yet know the LORD’ (3.7). Furthermore it happened at a time when ‘the word of the LORD was rare . . . [and] visions were not widespread’ (3.1). That time, in other words, was not auspicious for people of faith: the wind was against them. In the northern hemisphere at the start of the twenty-first century, it still is. Which only makes the story of Samuel’s call the more relevant and surprising.

It takes place against a background of barrenness and despair. Hannah, Samuel’s mother, is childless, and is taunted by her husband’s other wife (1.6). In her bitterness, Hannah pours out her feelings before God in the Jerusalem Temple (1.11), and her prayer is answered: she conceives and gives birth. Overwhelmed with gratitude, she dedicates the child to God: the gift is not held on to or controlled, but offered back to the Giver. This is the exact opposite of a consumerist society: there is a sense in which God’s initiative in calling Samuel is made possible

