

The Bell that has long been ringing
Homily for 2nd Sunday of Ordinary Time
January 14, 2018

In the December 13, 1982 issue of Time Magazine, there was a story about a famous man's conversion to Christ. The article read in part: "Malcolm Muggeridge, once an atheist, a career journalist, at one time hearty drinker and womaniser, at age seventy-nine surrendered his will to the Lord. This gadfly of British letters, an eloquent peddler of words, gathered up his contradictions and beliefs in November 1982, marched down to a small chapel in Hurst Green, Sussex, and, with his wife, became a member of the Roman Catholic Church. His decision to convert was inspired in part by the life and witness of Mother Teresa. Commenting on the experience, this mellowed old iconoclast (someone who destroys religious images) said there was:

*"a sense of homecoming, of picking up the threads of a lost life, of responding to a bell that has long been ringing, of finding a place at a table that has long been left vacant."*¹

I came across Mr Muggeridge's vivid prose in my study this week as I was thinking about today's readings. The Samuel passage and Gospel are stories of invitation, of a bell ringing.

They evoke from those called as heartfelt a response as that described by this famous 20th Century Englishman.

Samuel's call is a story that like David and Goliath is a perennial Old Testament favourite. We had read in an earlier chapter of Samuel's godly mother, Hannah. For years she was barren, and so she prayed:

O LORD of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head."

A nazirite was a person who lived a consecrated life. After Samuel was born, Hannah then fulfils her promise, and from a young age, even before he knew the Lord, her son is entrusted to the care of Eli the Priest.

There is a subtle nuance at play in this passage. In the original Hebrew, there's more than one level of meaning going on because there are puns taking place. Let me explain how. The name Samuel in Hebrew means "he who hears God", and the name Eli in Hebrew means "my God" – 'El' means God, 'I' means "my". So if you read the story that way, what you are reading is the story of a little boy called "he who hears God." On hearing God he then goes to a priest saying "my God, did you speak?" Then the priest, Eli (my God) tells him "no, go back, I didn't say anything." So it's a play on words. God IS speaking to Samuel and Samuel IS listening to his God, but he thinks it's the priest named 'my God' instead of the actual my God, that is, the true

¹ MLA: "People: Dec. 13, 1982 - Time." <<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,923153,00.html>>.

Eli. And so when Samuel says, “Speak Lord, your servant listens”, in a sense, he's embodying what his very name means.

Do you hear what a beautiful story this is about receptivity to God's word? Samuel's life is then encapsulated by the final verse of the reading:

As Samuel grew up, the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground.²

Did you notice, even before he knew God, God knew Samuel, and he calls him? Although very different from Malcolm Muggeridge, both in age, one is a senior and the other a child, the bell had been ringing. Eli perceptively knew it was God ringing the bell and counselled Samuel to respond.

Samuel's response reflects the posture of how we should respond to God when God speaks to us; that we should be receptive to His word and obedient to His will – that's what Samuel represents. While separated by centuries and he had lived decades of a hardened life, it was something very similar Muggeridge expressed when he said:

"there was a sense of home-coming, of picking up the threads of a lost life, of responding to a bell that has long been ringing, of finding a place at a table that has long been left vacant."

This was Muggeridge's way of saying: “Speak Lord, for your servant is listening”.

I remember in my life, that it was as a young man of 22, that on a Thursday morning in February I experienced my heart warmed by the Love that has never let me go. The bell that had long been ringing. Ever since, I have been learning to pray: “Speak Lord, for your servant is listening”. Even though baptised as a baby it was only in my early twenties that I started to know the Lord, but how he knew me! On that February morning, he got my attention. By His Grace has had it ever since.

How about in your life? Can you resonate with what I am saying? That time when God got your attention? You responded to a bell that had long been ringing, and you began to discover your place at the table that had long been vacant.

Cherish that memory. There is so much of life experience that can, in turn, deaden that sense of call, and we lose the vitality of that earlier time where we heard the invitation so clearly.

Maybe for others of you here today, that bell is ringing now and awaiting your response. Take this opportunity to pray:

“Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.”

² [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (1 Sa 3:19). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

In responding to the bell, we are to then live with a new kind of purpose. Our Gospel illustrates how to do this.

At the surface level, this is a straightforward story. Andrew and another disciple of John the Baptist, many think it St. John the Evangelist, are directed to Jesus by the Baptist, as he famously says:

Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Jesus' asks the two: "What are you looking for?" and rather than answering his question, they ask another? "Rabbi, where are you staying?"

The Greek word they use for staying is *menó*, it means "to remain", and throughout the rest of John's Gospel that word is going to have great theological significance. To remain or to abide is going to be a key theme. Jesus will say things like, "he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me or abides in me, and I abide in him." In John 17, Jesus' prays that the disciples will remain in him as he remains in them, that they will still stay in him as he stays in them. So the imagery of remaining means staying near Jesus, being in intimacy with Him as a disciple, as a believer.

Interestingly, in John's Gospel we'll see some people will believe in Jesus but they won't remain with him. In other words, they'll accept the teachings about them but they don't stay with him.

So you have to both believe in Jesus and remain in Jesus.

This opening passage here is about much more than them saying, hey where are you staying for the night. It's all about discipleship. It's about them becoming followers of Jesus, of responding to the bell. In order to be a follower of Jesus, you don't just have to believe "he is the Lamb of God," you have to remain with him, you have to stay with him, you have to abide in him. So Jesus invites them into that and says come and see, come and see where I remain, come and see where I abide, so you can learn to live like I live. Ultimately in John's Gospel Jesus abides in the bosom of the Father, and that's where he wants his disciples, like the beloved disciple, to remain in him.

A 5th Century Church Father, St. Basil of Selucia, in commenting on today's Gospel wrote:

Having recognised the prophet foretold by the prophets, Andrew led his brother to the one he had found. To Peter, who was still in ignorance, he revealed the treasure: "We have found the Messiah" for whom we were longing. How many sleepless nights we spent beside the waters of the Jordan, and now we have found the one for whom we longed!

I think this is what Malcolm Muggeridge was getting at when he described the sense of homecoming and taking his place at the table. He found the one for whom he had longed.

May we discover more deeply the riches that belong to those who by believing in Jesus remain in him as we pray: "Speak Lord for your servant is listening, for we are responding to the bell that has long been ringing".