To begin, a phrase from this morning’s gospel: “Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert”. What does alert mean? To be alert is to be *wide awake and ready to take action!* Some of us really struggle to hear that morning call – time to wake up! We can feel just like my six year old granddaughter who pulls the duvet back over her head and says grumpily – ‘Go away Mummy. I need more sleep’. Others of us are naturally awake and alert early in the morning, the larks that can be so annoying to the rest of the household!

Those to be ordained deacon here this morning have been awake and ready for action for a while now. Not just this morning. It is probably several years since they first heard those words: ‘wake up’. It was the word of God’s call to them and they responded, ready for action, and have been working hard through the process of selection and training (of which of course there is still more to come!) until today.

Someone who was quick to wake up and respond to a call was little Samuel in the Old Testament reading. Samuel’s mother had thought she would never have children - which would have been a cause of much shame in her society. She implored God for the gift of a baby and her behaviour was so intense and strange as she prayed that Eli, the old priest in the Temple who was watching her as she poured out her grief and longing to God, thought she was under the influence of drink. But *God* recognised her pain and longing, her faithfulness and trust and heard her prayer: so in due time a boy, Samuel, was born to her and her husband. It was with overwhelming joy and thanksgiving that she took him at the tender age of three to the Temple to be given in love for service to God.

There Samuel grew and thrived until he was about twelve, on the verge of adulthood. One night, a strange thing happened. He woke up suddenly, long before the light of dawn, thinking that old Eli was calling him because he needed help. But it was not Eli who had called. When Samuel returned twice more in response to the voice he thought he had heard it *was Eli* who spotted that something important was happening. He explained that God wanted to speak to Samuel and told him to say, quite simply, “Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.”

Eli took this child, who had been born and nurtured in the context of prayer and worship, very seriously, and recognised that this young boy was hearing none other than the voice of God. A voice, incidentally, which Eli had probably not been conscious of for some time, maybe not for years. “The word of the Lord was rare in those days” – it seems that the adults had not been listening.

Children can have deep awareness of God, and we need to take them very seriously and with respect. As a church we have enormous privileges and responsibilities passed on to us by our forebears who, with compassion, and a vision for young people to have opportunities of education, set up many church schools which we have inherited. Clergy and lay people are usually warmly welcomed to share with teachers in the task of taking children seriously and offering them a Christian education and an understanding of God’s love for them. All this happens particularly through initiatives such as school assemblies; *Open The Book* (an innovative scheme for helping children to know, enjoy and understand the great stories of the Bible); parish-based holiday clubs and the preparation of children for Confirmation. Eli reminds us, from long ago, to take children seriously for, like us, and sometimes *even better than adults*, they can hear and respond to God’s word.

In fact God is calling all of us, all the time, from the youngest to the eldest. From the moment of our conception, made in the image of God, we are called first to be in relationship with God then with one another and then to hear the call of our particular vocation – the work which only we can do in the service of God’s kingdom. Have you, like these ordinands here this morning, heard and responded to that call?
How might you hear and recognise the voice of God calling you? Maybe you are here today to support a friend or a member of your family but you are not yet a Christian yourself. You are very welcome. God loves you and is calling you, too, into a relationship of love and joy through Jesus. If something is stirring in your heart or maybe even challenging you then it might help to ask whoever it is you are here to support to tell you their story of how they have come to this point of ordination to serve Jesus Christ and his Church. Hear their story and, in it, hear God’s voice calling you too to follow.

Or maybe you have been a Christian for a long time but are feeling restless or unfulfilled in what you are doing, or perhaps you are a young person thinking about your career choice and wondering whether God might be calling you to ordination. Do not say nor let anyone tell you that you are too young. The Archbishops have started a campaign to encourage young people to seriously consider ordination and are looking and have asked the whole church to pray for a very significant increase in numbers. Could one of them be you?

So what do we need to do if we sense the gentle sound of God’s call? Or if we have a sense of urgency that now is the time to wake up and be ready? The answer is quite simple. Just say: “Here I am, Lord. Speak, for your servant is listening”.

What might stop us from making that response? Probably fear. Fear of making big changes in our lives that will affect us and other people. Fear that God might ask some incredibly difficult thing of us which we think we could never manage to achieve. Indeed that is exactly what happened for Samuel. He was asked to tell Eli some very hard home truths. But God sustained him through all of that and helped him to become a great prophet and a leader of his people.

When Jesus told the gospel story of the servants who were to be awake and alert ready for the return of their master, it was not so that the master could give them things to do: it was so that he could be with them. “Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat and he will come and serve them.” God’s first desire is to be in relationship with us and for us to be sustained in that relationship. Only then can we serve.

Trusting, or maybe it feels more like risking, God’s sustaining love, will you say this morning:

“Here I am Lord. Speak, for your servant is listening.”

Do not be afraid. As you respond to God’s call, everything else will gradually become clear.

Amen.