

Bedmond 15.01.2017

Today is not Vocations Sunday. That comes on the third (or is it the fourth?) Sunday after Easter. So any nudges you might receive from this sermon today are likely to be reinforced on a Sunday in May!

Despite that, when you look at the readings set for today it really might as well be Vocations Sunday. If we had read the Old Testament passage set we would have heard the prophet Isaiah talking about his vocation to prophetic ministry and saying “The Lord called me before I was born”. He then goes on to depict the Lord as saying to the people of Israel “I have given you as a light to the nations”. Then we heard in Paul’s letter to the Christians in Corinth that he was addressing all those who were “called to be Saints”. The theme goes on in the Gospel passage from John when we hear how two of the disciples of John the Baptist, having changed their allegiance from John to Jesus, promptly went and called Simon who became a follower – and changed his name to Peter. Very soon after that, Jesus himself calls Philip to follow him and Philip promptly calls his friend Nathaniel to become a follower. That’s a lot of vocational calling for one set of readings on Not-Vocations Sunday.

You might, of course, be wondering why I should choose to speak to a congregation such as this comprising largely of people at a rather mature stage of life, either already well established in their life’s work or well past the likelihood of significant changes in their lifestyle and work experience. Isn’t the idea of Vocation something for the young to consider as they stand poised over career and study choices that will dictate the course of their lives? And isn’t ‘vocation’ all about the call to ordained ministry, hardly something for people of our age to have in mind?

Wrong on both counts!

First, God is as likely to need the experience, wisdom (we might hope!), accumulated skills and arts of our later years as he is to need the energy, enthusiasm and vision of youth. And as far as ordained ministry is concerned, that is only one of many vocational callings – and, just by way of warning, God does now seem to be calling to ordained ministry as many men and women of mature years and with life-experience

behind them as he is the younger members of his Church. Keep your spiritual ears open to the possibility of such a call from God for you.

This is how a Church statement in the 1980's 'Towards a theology of the laity' put it:-

The young are called, the elderly are called. There is no retirement from the Christian pilgrimage. The beautiful are called, and the unlovely. The sick are called as well as the healthy and the energetic. Activists are called, and also quiet people.....women are called and men are called.....We are called no matter what our occupations may be.....cleaners and car dealers are called just as much as professors and lawyers and missionary nurses.....Nor does our calling depend on any kind of ordination.....(vocation) does not indicate any special 'grade' of Christian more holy than the laity.

Once you are a member of Christ's body, the Church, there is no escaping 'vocation', God's call to you personally. All I want to put to you today is simply the question – is God perhaps calling you – or me - to some change of direction in our work, our retirement or our lifestyle ? Are you keeping yourself open to the possibility of a calling to some new direction? It's never too late in life to consider such an idea.

Of course, it's always difficult to know whether an inclination towards something new is actually from God or is perhaps more of a need in your own mind to find pastures new. We all face important crossroads in life which can spark off the search for new directions – a bereavement, job loss, illness, relationship breakdown, change of home or work circumstances, changing social scene. Could one of these be, for you, a catalyst for rethinking vocational calling?

But how can you actually know whether it is God who is calling you to a fresh direction rather than some personal inclination? In my own case, I suppose it was a growing conviction that wouldn't go away that first led me in my early years of Christian faith to ordained ministry. As the many years have gone past, there have been several 'life-moments' when I've needed to reconsider prayerfully whether the direction I've been taking has been the right one, God's will for me. But you can never be sure. And in the end, it seems that once decisions have been taken and paths chosen, somehow God uses them and they become God's vocation.

I would suggest one or two guidelines to help test whether a call is from God or from some other source.

First, to state what may seem to all of us the obvious. If the direction in which you feel you might be called will lead to harm for other people, it is almost certainly not from God. My faith is based on the teachings of the New Testament and the life and teachings of Christ, not on the depiction of God in so many passages of what we Christians call the Old Testament. I do not believe that God ever calls anyone to hurt, maim or kill another human being. A vocation to exact vengeance or to force people against their will to adopt a particular lifestyle, can never be, as I see it, a calling from God.

Second, it is highly unlikely that God would call you to something for which you simply do not have the aptitude or the gifts and talents which that change of direction would require. It is highly unlikely – I'm glad to say – that God will call me to train to become a Sumo wrestler.

Third, it is what you **are** that God is likely to call on for his service, not what you wish you were. When it comes to considering whether God might be calling you (or me) to some fresh direction in life, he calls us as we are. Of course, you might become a different person as you respond to that call. In today's Gospel reading we are reminded that Simon, whose name means a dove, a rather timid and fluttering creature, became Peter, whose name means a rock, strong and dependable.

Who knows where God's call on this Not-Vocations Sunday may take you – or any of us. You have three months before Vocations Sunday to consider it.