

The Ministry of Ordinary Things

PREACHER : The Very Revd Adrian Newman, Dean of Rochester

Rochester Cathedral
Sunday, October 1st 2006
Sung Eucharist – 10.30am

Matthew 4 : 18-22

There is a well-worn legend that Jesus dies, rises from the dead, and ascends into heaven. On his arrival an angel asks him what plans he has made for spreading the gospel to the world he has just died for. Jesus replies that he had left 11 men on earth to spread his message. The angel says 'and what if they fail?' – to which Jesus replies 'I have no other plans'.

Jesus left the task of spreading his message to 11 ordinary people. The most important message the world could ever hear, yet there were no printing presses to give it a wide circulation, no transistor radios to beam the message across the airwaves, no TVs, no satellite discs, no Internet, no worldwide web to span the continents and reach into every home. Just 11 ordinary people. I have no other plans.

This is the final sermon in a mini series about vocation, the way in which God calls and sets aside people for specific tasks and roles in the church and in the world. We've looked at vocation in general; we've considered the calling of the laity within a cathedral; we've thought about ordained ministry; last week Peter talked about the call to belong within God's community, the church. And today we finish up with something a little bit different – the vocation to ordinary things.

It means we've sort of come full circle, because you may recall the illustration that Chris Dench began this sermon series with. He had been to see Billy Elliott the night before, in the West End, and it suddenly struck him that what Billy experienced, as he encountered the physical beauty of ballet for the first time, was a vocation to dance. It welled up within him, it brought him alive. It was, in the well worn phrase, what he was born for.

The great danger in talking about vocation is that we define it in terms that are too narrow. It's about the ministry, the priesthood, the holy mysteries.

No it isn't! Everyone is called. The vocation to follow Jesus is not reserved for some special breed of humans with a dog-collar-shaped indentation just below their Adam's Apple. Not even for Readers, or pastoral assistants, or evangelists.

In today's Gospel reading, Matt 4:18-22, Jesus calls Simon, Andrew, James and John to follow him. This passage is the story of the 'vocation' or calling of 2 sets of brothers, Peter and Andrew, James and John. These were ordinary blokes, toughened by life and by trade, men with strong family ties and regular jobs, they were ordinary people going about their ordinary business.

It remains a salutary lesson to the C of E that none of these 4 would have got through a ministerial selection conference. Come to think of it, Jesus himself would probably not have been selected to be a Vicar.

This ordinary Jesus calls ordinary people to follow him. And to recognise that we are all called to ministry is a vital step in making sense of our lives.

I am in the process of working out a forward plan with my colleagues on the Chapter, a vision for how our ministry here at the Cathedral might develop and grow. I doubt that I will be able to offer some great evangelistic strategy, no 10-year plan for the conversion of Medway. The answer, for all our scheming and dreaming, is staring us in the face as we look around at each other today. Ordinary people actively participating in the ministry of Jesus, discovering those new spiritual dimensions in what is everyday and routine. I have no other plans.

It's easy to think that Christian ministry involves doing different things to the things you're doing now. Oh yes, ministry is about preaching, presiding at holy communion, counselling those in need, being the celebrant to help people mark important rites of passage – birth, marriage, and death.

But as with so much in Christianity, the key mental shift to make is this – it's not so much about doing different things, as doing things differently. It's about discovering a new dimension to what you are already doing rather than setting off in an entirely new and different direction altogether.

When Jesus called these 4 men to be 'fishers of men', he was taking something they knew about - fishing - and injecting it with a new meaning.

Have you noticed that it was 2 sets of brothers that Jesus called to begin with? This is no accident - Matthew is very keen on 'brotherhood' as a symbol of the new relationships opened up in the Church through Christ; 'brotherhood' is injected with a new dimension - brothers in blood become brothers in Christ.

So what is happening in the call of these men? 2 things they know about - being brothers, and fishing - are both given a new dimension. In following Jesus brotherhood goes deeper than blood, and fishing means more than fish. Fishing and brotherhood are elevated to a new plane.

I believe there is an insight here into what ministry is likely to mean in practice for us. It is less likely that we will be called to a completely different type of life (although this **does** happen - I wasn't always like this!); but more often we will find that what we are already doing gets injected with a new level of meaning.

I was privileged to come across one of the most extraordinary acts of ministry I have ever witnessed when I was a Curate in East London. There was a member of the church, a very quiet and by now elderly lady, who easily went unnoticed as that church gathered to worship week by week. But one day I discovered, quite by chance, that she cooked a meal every day for a housebound neighbour, and took it round, and spent time with her. And she had been doing this, every single day of every single week of every single month of every single year, for over 20 years. If that is not a calling to ministry I don't know what is.

A Bishop was conducting a Confirmation at a particular church (not in this Diocese, I'm pleased to say), and the Vicar introduced one member of his congregation to the Bishop with these words: 'Bishop, I'd like you to meet Mr X, he's our chief server'. That man was the manager of an NHS Trust, but to the Vicar his ministry was defined by the task he carried out within the Church. And that is quite simply wrong.

When you step into a classroom full of children as a teacher, you are doing Christian ministry. When you prepare a set of accounts clearly and concisely, you are doing Christian ministry. When you lay those bricks, or set that broken arm, or write that lease, or sing in that concert, or type up that report, or cook that meal for your family, or clean that toilet, or change that nappy, you are doing Christian ministry.

There is a famous little book called 'Practicing the Presence of God', written by an obscure 17th century monk called Brother Lawrence. A soldier in his teens, wounded and invalided out of the army with a permanent disability, working unsuccessfully as a footman for a time, he was converted at the age of 18 and eventually entered the 'Barefoot Carmelite' order, so called because of their emphasis on austerity.

Despite his desperate desire to serve God in high spiritual ways, Brother Lawrence was allocated duties in the monastery that confined him to the kitchen, and he longed for all the opportunities for ministry that his brother monks enjoyed. After a time of railing against his spiritual confinement, he began to come to terms with the fact that this was his calling, and he determined to discover God there, surrounded by the pots and pans of the kitchen, every bit as much in the more obviously 'holy' places that his brother monks enjoyed.

He writes: 'I possess God as peacefully in the bustle of my kitchen, where sometimes several people are asking me for different things at the same time, as I do upon my knees before the Holy Sacrament'. And again: 'I turn my little omelette in the pan for the love of God....when I can do nothing else, it is enough to have picked up a straw for the love of God'.

When I was a student, years ago in Bristol, a good friend of mine used to sit next to me in some of the economics lectures. I noticed that he would always inscribe the letters TTGOG in the margin of his notes before the lecture began. Intrigued, I asked him what this meant, to which he replied 'TTGOG – to the glory of God'.

Everything can be redeemed, changed, transformed by doing it to the glory of God. And that, my friends, that is ministry. Ultimately, the call of God to you and me is not about a change of direction, but a change of heart. We are all called to the ministry of ordinary things, that practice of the presence of God that transforms even the most mundane and ordinary task into something that mediates love, and draws us (and others) towards God.

And if you were to ask Him, as you stand quietly waiting to receive bread and wine at the altar in a few moments time, what the future holds for you, maybe you might hear Him whisper quietly back: Practice my presence; do all that you do to the glory of God; for I have no other plans.