

Christian Vocation

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Rochester Cathedral
Sunday 3rd September 2006
10.30am Sung Eucharist

May I speak in the name of God who is Father, Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

During the next four Sundays the sermons will all be around the theme of Vocation and Ministry. I have been asked to begin with the theme 'Christian Vocation.'

Yesterday I went to see the musical 'Billy Elliott' for the third time. 'Billy Elliott' is a film and now obviously a musical. In the middle of the musical yesterday I suddenly realised that it is about recognising a vocation. Now I don't want you to think I haven't given any thought to preaching here this morning, I've been thinking and worrying about it since last October when Adrian phoned me and explained the idea of doing a mini sermon series on raising the awareness of vocation and ministry. It is strange how sometimes things just suddenly click and so it was in the middle of Billy Elliott that I realised this is about vocation.

For those who have not seen the film or musical Billy Elliott is a young teenager growing up in the North East during the turbulent times of the Miners' Strike in the mid 1980's. His mother has died and he lives with his father, his brother and his invalid grandmother. His home is working class both his father and brother are miners and money is tight. Billy attends boxing classes to fulfil his father's expectations and one day accidentally finds himself in a ballet class despite it being an all girl activity. His teacher spots his talent and as you can imagine he is greatly discouraged by his father who tries to stop him doing this ridiculous girly thing of dancing.

In the end his father is won over and puts himself out to raise the money for Billy to go to London to audition at the Ballet School. Following the audition one of the interviewers asks: 'What does it feel like when you dance?' Billy talks about 'losing himself in himself'. Billy leaves home and moves away to his new life at Ballet School for his vocation, which is a vocation to dance.

A vocation which is a true vocation has something about it whereby it is so fulfilling and absorbing that we lose ourselves in its living out. God calls each and every one of us; the question though, is to what?

First and foremost, God calls us to change: to become more Christ-like. We are called to live out our lives in response to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That process began at our baptism, but it continues through prayer, through the reading of the scriptures and through the receiving of Holy Communion.

One of the constant themes in the New Testament is that, lives – touched- by - Christ were changed. What is true for the characters of the New Testament is true for us. As we encounter and respond to Christ we cannot help but be changed.

But while we are called to change, we are also called, to be more deeply ourselves. God never calls us to be something or someone we are not. God always calls us to what we are capable of becoming. It may be that there are parts of us which are under developed, or which rarely see the light of day which need to be allowed to flourish so that we can be our true selves.

It may be that we have hidden gifts, gifts that need to be discovered or there may be something that we have secretly always wanted to do but have not had the courage or the time to try. Whatever it is, we need to find an outlet that will allow us to feel more excited about life or indeed to feel more alive.

Our vocation can also change during the course of our lives. We are called to do different things as we are exposed to new situations and circumstances. Our vocations grow and develop as we grow and develop. Consequently, what we perceived to be our calling at 18 may be very different from how we perceive our calling at 50. The vocational chapter of our lives is never completed. Our vocation is ongoing and continuous.

To talk about having a vocation, suggests that we are committing ourselves to a way of being, which will shape and mould our lives. Although our vocations will differ from one another, and we will experience a variety of vocations during the course of our life, there will nevertheless be a common denominator running through those different vocations: we are each called to be Christ's, and to live out our lives in response to his life, death and resurrection.

One of the most popular devotional books is The Imitation of Christ by Thomas a Kempis. This book has dozens of short chapters on different aspects of the life of Christ. The central insight of the book is that, in the Christian life, it is possible for us to imitate the life of Christ. Our task as Christians is to somehow replicate Christ's life here on earth.

Becoming Christ like in every detail is not a live option for us. In Christ, we see what it means to be truly human and truly divine. The incarnation teaches us that Christ is unique: there can never be an exact copy of Christ again in the world. Even the saints, the most holy men and women of every generation are not carbon copies of Christ. Rather they have entered into the family likeness of Christ. Within their lives we can glimpse a particular aspect of Christ's life.

Being Christ-like does not involve us in a personality transplant. Rather, being Christ-like involves discovering what aspect of the life of Christ we are drawn to and what aspect of the life of Christ we can realistically and gracefully develop within our lives. Being Christ-like is not about being something or someone we are not; being rooted in service, however, is an integral part of the Christian vocation.

So why are we called?

Part of living out this vocation, of being Christ's; is to recognize the importance of why we are being called for this purpose. The reason is clear and straightforward: our calling as Christians is to continue God's work in Christ of reconciling the world to himself and our mission in Christ, is to continue the work of the incarnation.

St. Teresa of Avila expressed this when she wrote:

Christ has no body now on earth but yours,
 No hands but yours, no feet but yours;
 Yours are the eyes through which is to look out
 Christ's compassion to the world,
 Yours are the feet, with which he is to go about doing good,
 And yours are the hands with which he is to bless us now.

Suddenly our vocation to be Christ's takes on a sharper focus. We are the co-workers of God, doing what we can, to discern the movement of the Spirit in the world around us, and trying to co-operate with the Spirit in the fulfilment of God's will. This vocation is lived out in the world. Sometimes we make the mistake of being so Church-centred, we assume that the Church, rather than the world, is the arena for God's presence and activity.

The truth is, that God is to be found in the world, often hidden and anonymous, reconciling the whole of creation to himself. The world is where we encounter God and where we have opportunities to discern God's will and to co-operate with his Spirit.

But how do we do that? How do we discern God's call to us and how do we co-operate with his Spirit? For us to be open to the movement of God's Spirit within the world, we have to be open to the movement of God's Spirit within ourselves. We will need to be disciplined in our times of prayer and in those times of prayer we will wait upon God's presence, silently in expectation. The quality of our prayer is important and we need to be generous in the amount of time we give to it.

As our life of prayer grows, so I believe we discover that the scriptures, particularly the Gospels, become increasingly important to us. They become alive to the presence of God and speak to us in a way that is profound and exciting. The Gospel stories, which may in the past have seemed not altogether relevant to us, take on a new life and we begin to see ourselves within the stories and find ourselves encountering the living Christ through them.

Having encountered the living Christ in the scriptures, we begin to see him in the world around us, in other people, in situations, in creation. Vocation, our -calling - in Christ, is not an optional extra for those considering ordination or the religious life. It is at the heart of what it is to live an authentic Christian life. It is closely linked to prayer because it is about responding to God's activity in today's world. To be able to co-operate with God's Spirit we need to stay close to, and be able to recognise, the movements of the Spirit.

Our calling may involve us in major decisions and change. We may experience callings of the kind we read in the scriptures where people like Abraham have their lives turned upside - down as they respond to God's call to them.

However, for the most part, we will probably experience God's call in listening to his voice every day and trying to discern in each present moment what it is that God requires of us whether it is at home, at school, in the shops, but we do need to listen and as well as listening to respond.

That sense of calling may be less earth shattering than Abraham's calling, but in the long term it may turn our lives upside - down just as much as Abraham's call turned his life upside - down. Our calling to be Christ's is continuous and ongoing, and through it God will help us to become our best selves for his glory, and the furtherance of his Kingdom.

Our vocation will always involve us in change and movement, whether it be physical, spiritual, emotional or intellectual. Vocational people are people always on the move.

John Henry Newman once prayed

God has created me to do some definite service;
 God has committed some work to me
 Which is not committed to another.
 I have my mission. I may never know it in this life,
 but I shall be told it in the next.
 I have a part in this great work
 I am a link in the chain,
 A bond of connection between persons.

God has not created me for naught.
 I shall do good, I shall do God's work;
 I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place,
 while not intending it, if I do but keep God's commandments
 and serve the Lord in my calling.

Therefore I will trust my Lord.
 Whatever, wherever I am, can never be thrown away.
 I ask not to see - I ask not to know - I ask simply to be used.
 Amen