

SERMON FOR EPIPHANY 2 | 14.01.18

Let me start with a question: *Do you have a vocation?*

In the past these words would have thundered down from pulpits up and down the land, and were designed to encourage people (by which of course I mean men!) to consider ordination to priestly ministry. For ordinary Christians in the pews there was a built in assumption that God only called (from the Latin, vocare) a special minority of people to act as his special messengers and church managers.

In time this got widened to other jobs which were thought to be part of the caring professions – like nursing or working as a doctor abroad - and has often been misunderstood to refer to almost any job where the pay is poor! If you had ‘a vocation’ then you would do it anyway. Technically clergy aren’t paid: they receive a ‘stipend’, which is supposed to be sufficient to keep them above the poverty line.

But of course the idea that God only ‘calls’ certain people, and for very specific tasks is all nonsense. As every baptism reminds us, each and every one of us is called to be a friend of Jesus – called by name and filled by his Holy Spirit to be his light and life in the world where we are. To have that high-jacked by a professional class who have ‘real vocations’ is ridiculous!

But of course it does let the non-ordained off the hook too! *I don’t need to do very much for the Church - and I don’t need to pray much either - because all the ‘real’ work of managing the Church and serving the poor is being done by the professionals! It will still be there whether I do anything for it or not!*

So over the years has grown up this twin level - of those ‘in the Church’ as people say, wearing dog collars, and those who are members of the Church but not ‘in’ the Church!! To all appearances some have vocations and the others don’t.

And I am sorry that we all collude with that to some degree.

Including me – in practical terms if not in theory. I look back now to the mid 1960s when I clearly heard a call to ordained ministry. I was just nine: I can tell you the place and the date. The fact that I went and trained to be a teacher first meant that over twenty years elapsed between the call and ordination itself, but there was no doubt that I was leaving behind a secure career in education for the uncertainties of ordained ministry.

The Gospel accounts of the call of the disciples – we get just one of them in St John’s version this morning – need to be read together if we are to get any kind of accurate picture of what was going on. Piecing together the bits, it is pretty clear that Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip and their companions were already deeply affected by the preaching of John the Baptist. Some of them were actually John’s disciples. As such they were also aware of the growing impact of Jesus’ ministry and were seeing how John’s pioneering work was opening a way for Jesus’ even more radical message – that he was the Messiah they had all been waiting for.

So the idea that Jesus suddenly came along to this group of fishermen and told them to follow him – like cold-calling Jehovah’s Witnesses – isn’t at all accurate. They were part of a movement of working people who spent much of their spare time reflecting on the new teaching that was to be heard in what we would now think of as evangelical ‘mass rallies’. By night they were out on the lake fishing; by day they were talking about the new religious ideas being shared in all the local lakeside communities.

So when Jesus came by one day to where they were working, the seeds were already planted – and growing strongly. Would they transfer their allegiance from John the Baptist to Jesus’ disciple group? Would they come and travel with him, leaving their boats in the hands of families and friends so they could return odd times when the travelling was less demanding? Yes they would.

But we know from the Gospel fragments that sometimes they were with him and sometimes they were fishing – a pattern that was particularly true after the Resurrection. However special their ‘vocation’ they were mixing and matching the whole time: fishing for fish, fishing for men and women – both/and.

Bishop Ric Thorpe, talking to the Deanery clergy last week, reminded us of the way the Diocese of London is trying to address the fact that less than 3% of our parishes go to any Church on a Sunday. 3%! As a result we are back in early Church 'missionary mode', not unlike the days when the churches in Corinth, Ephesus and Thessalonika were receiving the letters of St Paul that we read in Church.

Ric's view, backed up by a mass of statistics, was that it will take another 30 years before the present situation will turn round and he wants us to use all our current resources to train more clergy and plant huge numbers of new churches – especially on the big housing estates where they are pretty thin on the ground. *Where there is no visible Church, he says, there is no visible presence of Jesus.* It is a massive undertaking.

And it can't be done by clergy alone – can't be, and shouldn't be. If we look back at the New Testament it is clear that St Paul was almost entirely writing to lay people: *Get out there and tell people about Jesus,* he says. As today's second reading spells out: *We know that all things work together for good for those who love God. For God has already predestined and called people; he has made them right with God and has empowered them to be the proclaimers of his Good News. In this way they will be glorified.*

And in case we get despondent he goes on: *What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up on the cross for us all, will he not also give us everything else?*

But how can this happen? After teaching I did four more years at theological college and another four years of part time study. After thirty-three years as a priest I have begun to get the hang of how to share the Gospel with people who have no Church background. And we have all this (ie this building) to help us. We know not only what the Bible has to teach but also the traditions of music and art and poetry and liturgy which make what we believe more than just a Word based experience.

But the Church is changing. Much of what we find appealing and enriching will simply not be available anymore because after two years training on part time courses, church leaders will necessarily only have time to concentrate on the basics of Bible study and easily constructed worship. The idea that everyone has a vocation to lead and to pray will be at the forefront of the Church's ministry and lay leadership will be the norm – as it was in the 1st century – however slender the training they have received.

If this pared down style of Church seems to be missing many of the things we value, we within the catholic tradition of the Church must take some of the responsibility. If we have lacked the ability to draw in newcomers, have failed to educate ourselves and failed to show the relevance and the wisdom that our tradition has to offer, then we have only ourselves to blame.

Most of all, if we have not been praying for the work we are doing, praying for those leading us and only half-heartedly committing ourselves to the work that flows from this place, then we have no excuse: the historical resources that have been entrusted to us will eventually disappear and we will be hard pushed to remain the place of faith, hope and love that we aspire to be.

Do each of us have a vocation? Undoubtedly! Is God calling each of us to serve him in our own place and in our own way? For sure. Will that require us to be better trained messengers of his Gospel? Yes. Do we need to work harder at refocusing our ministry in drawing in newcomers? Of course.

Our ministry - yours and mine – can only flourish when we use all that we have in a truly collaborative venture. Old models will have to be tested and new ones may need to replace them.

The alternative, sadly, is to see much of what we value thrown out altogether. Our vocation, God's calling, is to see how what we do at St James' can be reimagined for these very challenging times.

Please pray that our current parish review – under the title “Phase 2” – is open to what God is calling us to do, all of us, together.