

Second Sunday of Epiphany and in ordinary year A

Isaiah 49.3, 5-6 , 1 Corinthians 1.1-3, John 1.29-34

For sake of calling

Yesterday was an interesting day to reflect upon. In the morning and lunchtime wearing my hat as Chaplain to the Royal British Legion in Essex, I attended and led the annual conference in prayer. In the later afternoon I attended the Southend City community awards at the mayors residence (Porters). Some of the key people were paid a little in their lives of service but most were public spirited volunteers. Many of such folk, whether raising millions for the legions works of welfare and advocacy or assisting folk in our town with learning disabilities, better parenting or combating loneliness began with some need and some thanksgiving for themselves which turned into something which was not about themselves but others. It was gratifying to witness a disproportionate number of church folk represented in these largely secular worlds.

The Christian life is to follow Jesus and live the life we are put on this earth to live – we may call this our vocation. It must always begin with the self but also set it aside. Though such vocation will never be fulfilled completely in this life, please God for most there will be a goodly portion. For some though it will be thwarted by society conventions, the actions of others and much else.

All of our readings today have something to say about vocation in a sense. It is a word that comes from the Latin *vocare*, to call, and means the work and life a person called to by God. There are many kinds of work and lives into which we can be called. One of the key challenges is to discover and know the true voice of God. Society, the self and indeed self-interest can all play their part both in a positive and negative sense. Its easy to dismiss the seemingly “non-God” voice as inauthentic and yet from the earliest days vocation to the divine offices of deacon priest and bishop were not determined by what the person thought but rather the community from which and into which they were to practice such a vocation. The phrase “*my vocation*” is always a danger sign for folk entering these orders - it is always something shared not possessed. It was slightly different for the religious life where the inner self and calling was and still is ultimate.

There are of course other vocations; of mother, husband, father and wife for example and sometimes these are chosen and sometimes they fall to us by accident or follow from the advice of friends and those closest to us. Our careers might be seen as vocations and be planned or come by happy accident whereas for others earning a living is just a job to help fulfill other vocations in life. Whatever it is, it can't be called a vocation if it rests entirely on self and self desire alone. In such a life there is no calling except the desire of the self.

We have several types of vocation in our readings today: Isaiah the prophet, Paul the apostle John the Herald, and Jesus himself. They are all called in different ways by God and they disclose the nature of God.

The readings help us think about the call to holiness which is the aim of all Christian vocation. In the first reading, from the prophecy of Isaiah we hear one of the "Servant Songs". These were written during the Babylonian exile and provided hope for a people who had been ripped away from their homeland. The prophet was not just to tell people what they had got wrong but offer hope even in the midst of suffering. This suffering servant was called to do so from before birth – vocation is the fulfillment of what God desires before we are made.

Paul's letter to the Corinthians is a reminder that all are called to holiness; to be saints. And further than this, we have a collective vocation as the Church which can only be fulfilled where each member is in right relation to each other and the community within which it is set. Vocation is not private matter.

We might perceive from Paul's dramatic conversion that we will celebrate later this month on the 25th January, that fulfillment of vocation is a matter of me and God – but far from it. Paul loves the church at Corinth deeply beset though it is with deep ethical and doctrinal problems (sounds quite modern doesn't it?). Love and faith in the Risen Christ are God's remedies reflected in Paul's writings to re-embrace the collective vocation – our vocation as the Church – the body of Christ.

St. John the Baptist is a most striking and individualistic character and has a distinct calling from God. Yet key to his vocation is always pointing away from himself to God in Christ. The Gospel recalls the public actions of John the

Baptist to identify Jesus as the Lamb of God. John the Baptist recalls the baptism of Jesus and that he saw the Spirit descend upon Jesus. He takes us to the heart of all true vocation, service, the call to holiness and servant leadership – which echoes the prophetic vision of Isaiah which was to be fulfilled in Christ.

When folk find their true vocation in life they might not always be happy or lead an easy life but do have a degree of oneness. In the Christian faith we use the word atonement – ***at one ment***. It's used in a way of making up for separation – or what we call sin – separation from God and what he wills and wants us to be.

John the Baptist uses Old Testament imagery to point away from himself to Jesus as the Lamb of God, a sacrifice for our restoration or oneness with God and his creation. When we pray the “Lamb of God” at Mass, we should remember that Jesus willingly gave his life for us so that we could be redeemed and made one – not just with ourselves but with the whole church, creation and God himself.

Only Jesus could make that perfect offering of Himself. Jesus hears the call from the heart of humanity in all its profundity yearning and pain. He also hears the call from the heart of the Father to reconcile restore and heal. Through the oneness of humanity and divinity in Christ and His sacrifice, his vocation is fulfilled and ours is made possible once more.

He has given us ears open to obedience and made it possible for us to hear the Father's call to holiness. He has made us children of God, baptised in the blood of the Lamb and we may join our sacrifice to His, to offer our bodies—our lives—as living sacrifices. In doing so we find our vocation and calling for our own sakes and for sake of the church and for sake of the world.