

By the Grace of God I am What I am (I Corinthians 15 v10) – Advent 4 2010

Isaiah 7 vv 10-16 p692, Psalm 80, Romans 1 vv 1-7 p1128, Matthew 1 vv 18-25 p965

I have been asked to speak on the subject of vocation, more particularly on my calling to the priesthood. It is my conviction that all Christians are called. Jesus chose you and called you. Every one of you, every baptised person, has a specific vocation – the good works which God has called you to walk in. This is my conviction, but it is not mine alone. It is a very biblical doctrine. It is what Jesus says and what St Paul teaches and it is taken up and echoed in our prayer books. *You have not chosen me*, says Jesus; *I have chosen you*. St Paul describes you and me, all Christians, as God's *workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained, that we should walk in them*. He writes to Christians when he is himself in prison for the faith, *I therefore the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called*.

On this Fourth Sunday of Advent we think about Mary's vocation, the call of the blessed Virgin. It is interesting to speculate. Could Mary have said *No* to the angel? God's plan for the salvation of the entire Universe depends eternally on the incarnation of His Son. So could Mary have said *No*? What would have happened if she had said *No*? I'm sure she could have. God respects our free will. Mary could only become the Mother of God because she was prepared to say to the angel, *Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word*. Mary had to accept her vocation for God's eternal plan to work. So were there other girls in reserve to whom God could have sent the angel if Mary had refused to co-operate with God? Were there, maybe, other girls who had already rejected God's Will for their lives and refused to become the Mother of Jesus when God sent Gabriel to Mary? I doubt it. We can't know, but what I believe is that Mary freely chose to become the Mother of God and God knew from all eternity that this particular girl would accept this ineffable vocation. Mary's free choice to become the Virgin Mother of the Son of God is intrinsic to God's eternal plan for the salvation not only of mankind but of the whole created order.

So what about your calling and mine? Let's start with mine as I was asked to tell you all about it. To be honest, it was always a possibility in my mind from childhood that I was called to ordained ministry. I was privileged to be taken to church, encouraged to pray myself, prayed for and prayed with, and taught the Bible stories from a very young age. I can remember as a small child in Southfleet Church having a feeling that God was calling me to this ministry. As I grew older, I put it out of mind. It might have been imagination to think that God was calling me to the priesthood. I wasn't sure how my family and friends would react if I said I wanted to be ordained. No-one else in my immediate family was a clergyman – though I had a great uncle by marriage who was a Pentecostal pastor. I did not feel worthy to become a minister of religion. So at school I chose the subjects I was good at and did three science A levels. I then considered what I could do with science qualifications for the benefit of other people and decided I wanted to become a doctor.

Nevertheless, I was always very drawn to the Church. I was confirmed at what was then a young age for Confirmation. As a teenager I taught in Sunday School and, because Sunday School was held at the same time as Parish Communion, I got into the way of first attending at 8.00 said Prayer Book Communion services, which played a tremendous part in my

spiritual formation. At school and college I joined Christian unions. As a sixth former I took a lot of school assemblies. I belonged to Christian youth clubs, where I learned to preach extempore and lead worship. I also enjoyed the fellowship of churches other than our own, free churches as well as Church of England, when I attended Sunday worship with other Christian friends and family members.

When I was a youngster, Protestant Christians were still rather suspicious of Roman Catholicism, but, as a teenager and a young adult, I first acquired Christian friends who were Roman Catholics, then shared in Roman Catholic worship and then learned to value Roman Catholicism as an authentic part of God's Church, indeed by far the largest part of God's Church, while remaining firm in my Church of England beliefs that Holy Scripture contains all things necessary to salvation and that no human being, not even the Bishop of Rome, can be infallible!

I do believe that we are one Church with Christians of every denomination. I do believe that we are blessed by their fellowship and that we can learn a lot from them. I am, however, a faithful Anglican and I step back from Rome and Orthodoxy where they go beyond what can be proved from the Bible and I am unsatisfied by the so-called free churches which seem to me to be lacking in their appreciation of the Sacraments and too careless in rejecting what God has revealed to His people in times past, what Catholic Anglicans call Church Tradition.

Anyway, I entered my twenties with considerable experience of the Church of England and other Christian churches, a sound basic knowledge of the Bible, a regular worship habit, a firm faith (albeit a naïve one) and a desire to serve God by *doing my duty in that state of life unto which it shall please God to call me*. I'm afraid I also found that traditional religion worked very well for me – the Authorised Version of the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer, plus Hymns Ancient and Modern, not necessarily revised. Tradition has given me a firm personal foundation, but I wonder sometimes if it holds me back a bit from progressing. Dealing with tradition is like peeling an onion. You start with the dry wafery bits that have obviously got to go, but where do you stop? You can keep slicing away the layers until there is nothing left to go in the frying pan and all the goodness of the onion is in the brown bin!

Pursuing a career in medicine, when I left school, I studied for two years at the Middlesex Hospital Medical School. Again I spent a lot of time in Christian Union and other Christian activities. I attended a variety of local churches, mainly All Souls Langham Place where I experienced classical evangelical preaching at its best at their mid-morning and evening services. I still had to go to 8.00. however. I couldn't do without my Sunday Communion and often took part in the weekday Eucharists in the hospital chapel, even when there were only the chaplain and I to make it happen.

I wasn't bad at the traditional medical subjects like Anatomy and Physiology and I scraped through in Biochemistry, but it soon became clear that I was likely to fail Sociology. I rather resented having to do this subject at all as I couldn't see its relevance to Medicine and, as a course, it seemed to lack the rigour of proper science subjects like physics, chemistry and biology, which I had studied to A level. I think I felt that, as it was taught in the University

of London in the early 1970s, Sociology was an attempt to provide an academic justification for a particular political ideology, which was basically anti-religion and anti traditional British culture.

Anyway, it became clear that I was likely to fail Sociology, without which I could not continue my medical course, and I was forced to reconsider *that state of life unto which it shall please God to call me*. I thought and prayed hard about ordination. My friends at medical school (even those who were not Christians) encouraged me to go for it. You know where St Paul talks about doors closing so that we are guided by God to another course of action? Well that was how I came to feel. The door to a career in medicine was closing. It was up to me to decide what else God wanted me to do, and more and more things happened to make me believe that He wanted me to be a priest.

On the Feast of the Transfiguration (6th August) 1975 I attended Bredhurst Church and the vicar spoke in his sermon about vocation to ordained ministry. I think I felt what St Paul means when he says *the love of Christ constraineth us*. Like Mary I was free to say no to God, but on the other hand I just had to say yes. When I told old friends and family members that I intended to pursue a vocation to ordained ministry, whether or not they thought I was right, they were not surprised. My old headmaster said it was what he had always expected.

I went to see the curate and the vicar and the diocesan director of ordinands. I had to write a couple of essays (one supervised by Richard Allington Smith whom some of you will remember as Rector of Cuxton.) When the bishops of the diocese had decided that I might have a vocation, I was sent to a selection conference. A group of young men thinking about ordination met for a few days in a convent rest house to pray with and be interviewed by a group of selectors – senior clergymen and lay people. These recommended that I apply again in two years, but I didn't want to waste any time. So I arranged to start studying Theology at King's College London the next October. (They were more willing to be flexible about entrance procedures in those days!) Whilst there I attended another selection conference and this time I was recommended for ordination. I graduated from King's after three years Bachelor of Divinity, Associate of King's College. That's what my BD AKC means. I did a post-graduate year at Ripon College, Cuddesdon, near Oxford. At King's I learned a lot more about the Bible, Christian doctrine and Church History. I came to value daily Communion enormously. I learnt to cherish the Church as the Body of Christ and that schism (division of the Church) is a very serious matter, not to be entered into lightly because of disagreements within the fellowship. I possibly didn't learn as much as I should have done at Cuddesdon; I was just too impatient to start work as a minister.

Various holiday jobs in the Tower of London gardens, the Department of Health and Social Security, office work and factory floor work in industry and temporary grounds man at the Hempstead Valley Shopping Centre broadened my experience of life outside the Church.

I was ordained deacon in 1980 and priest in 1981, serving a curacy at All Saints Orpington till 1984, taking responsibility for St Christopher Newington (Ramsgate) and acting as

officiating chaplain at RAF Manston till 1986 and becoming Rector of Cuxton and Halling on January 2nd 1987.

So that is how I believe God called me to be where I am today. The circumstances of my life guided my path. I had advice and support from friends and family. I had the support of the fellowship of the Church. I was guided by the Bible. I shared all my thoughts with God in prayer. He closed some doors to me and opened others. I believe God spoke to me. I believe it was God Who called me to be a priest, but finally, it fell to me to say *Yes*.

Sometimes I wonder if I am doing the right thing when I find myself unable to elicit the response I had hoped for in terms of church growth, but, so far at any rate, I feel confirmed in what I am doing when I pray and read the daily Bible readings and receive the support of Christian friends. I tend to think that it is probably my vocation to be Rector of Cuxton and Halling for the rest of my employed life, but one always has to open to the prompting of God's Holy Spirit.

So much for my vocation. Now what about yours? I am sure that God has prepared good works for everyone of us to walk in. There is a unique contribution to the Kingdom of God which only you can make. You can't thwart God's plans by failing in your vocation. As Mordecai said to his niece Esther, when she was afraid to speak to the king to save her people from genocide, if she failed in her duty, deliverance for the Jews would come in some other way, but she and her household wouldn't share in it. God can work His purpose out with or without you and me, but what a privilege it is to be part of His plan, to do the good works He has prepared for us to walk in and to have a personal share in the building of the Kingdom of God.