

Sermon - Epiphany 2  
Vocation and Ministry

(1 Samuel 3 vv 1-20, Revelation 5 vv 1-10, John 1 vv 43-51)

*And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him. (Colossians 3 v17)*

Two week ago we were talking about the holy Name of Jesus – the Name which is above all other names. We said that as Christians, we bear that name, Christians; we are called to walk worthy of this vocation.

Last week we spoke about the Baptism of Christ. Jesus came up out of the waters and the Holy Spirit descended on Him in the form of a dove and a voice from heaven said, “Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” With some awe, we recalled that we Christians share this experience and reality. At Baptism we are anointed with the Holy Spirit and made the sons and daughters of God. We become members of Christ’s Body the Church, He in us and we in Him. We are the Temple of the Holy Spirit, living stones in God’s House, and we therefore cry out to God in worship, “Abba! Father!”

Today I want to speak about vocation – the sense of being called by God to serve Him in a particular way. Now, when we talk about vocation, some people think immediately of priesthood. Certain individuals, we believe, are called by God to be priests. This is their vocation. We pray for vocations. We foster vocations and we try to support our ordinands and our clergy with fellowship and training, financially, and, above all, in our prayers.

Ordained ministry is a very significant vocation, but it certainly does not exhaust the subject. There are many vocations and many ways of serving God. You might think of people called by God to become monks or nuns or to become missionaries or perhaps to serve in one of the authorised lay ministries such as reader, evangelist or pastoral assistant. But these possibilities do not exhaust the topic of vocation either.

It is not unusual to regard any of the caring professions – doctor, nurse, teacher – as a vocation. Certainly, a Christian may feel called by God to enter any of them.

I would like, however, to extend this to a wide range of occupations. Any job which is useful, which helps other people, which improves people’s quality of life, can be regarded as a vocation. God may just as well be calling you to be a carpenter or a bus driver or an artist as a priest or a doctor if the present need is for carpenters, drivers and artists and the talents God has given you are useful in those particular jobs. Neither should the task of raising a family be despised as a potential vocation from God.

I must, however, make the point that I am not following the modern trend of using the word “vocation” just as a fancy word for “job.” We sometimes hear the phrase “vocational training”, for example, used as a synonym for “job training”. “Vocational training” in that context seems to mean preparing people for work and is opposed to “academic education”, which, by implication, is reserved for an intellectual elite. I would strongly resist any attempt to deny education for its own sake to any class of person. Knowledge for its own

sake is a basic human aspiration because all knowledge is ultimately of God and we are made in His image.

A vocation is not just a job. The word vocation implies calling. A vocation is what you are called to do by God. Being a priest, a teacher, a doctor, a lawyer or a plumber is a vocation if you are doing it because God is calling you to do it. None of them is a vocation if you are doing it only for your own reasons – the income or prestige or even the job satisfaction the position brings. I would always encourage Christians, thinking about any kind of career, to ask themselves whether they think it is what God is calling them to do. It may be that God's plan for your life involves working professionally in the Church or in one of the so-called caring professions. It may be that God's plan for you means that you will be working in an ordinary secular job. Most people do. But, however you earn your living, I am sure God has a purpose for your life and, whatever job you do, you ought to be able to do it as for the Lord. If you cannot do your job as for the Lord, you ought to be wondering whether you should continue to do it at all.

Vocation - God's calling – is obviously not always lifelong, like priesthood, or even long term, like a profession or an occupation. God may be telling you to do something which you can finish today or tomorrow. Neither is vocation restricted to the way you earn your living and spend most of your waking hours. There are many jobs which need doing in the community with no wages and no career prospects, but you might well feel that God is calling you to help in the youth club, help out at the Over 50s, get involved in local politics, serve on a residents' association committee or offer for any of the 101 jobs that need doing around a church.

The point is that full-time Christian ministry does not begin when we are ordained. It ought to begin when we are baptised. We are redeemed. We are adopted as God's children. We are members of Christ's Body. We are the Temple of the Holy Spirit. We say, "All things come from you, and of your own do we give you."

If we are Christians, we ought to see everything that we have, everything we are, as being at God's disposal – our time, our talents, our money, whatever we have, whatever we are. Everything comes from Him. It is all His. We are stewards of God's grace. How can we use what God has so freely given to us for His Glory and in the service of His Church and His world? When we are baptised, we receive our basic vocation, the calling to be a Christian. Whether we are eyes or noses, hearts, livers or kidneys, hands or feet, we are part of Christ's Body, the Church. We are members of His Church for a reason – His reason - and we each have our part to play, our vocation. God has prepared good works for each one of us to walk in.

But how do we recognise what God is calling us to do with our lives – whether we mean by that our life-long occupation or what we are going to do this afternoon or what part we have to play in the Church in Cuxton and Halling? Not many people experience God's call as directly as Samuel in our Old Testament lesson.

We can start with the principles laid down in the Bible and the teaching of the Church. What does love require? What would a loving person do in this situation? What would Jesus do?

We see something that needs to be done, someone who needs love. Can we be the one to give it? A lot of us may ask “Why me?” It might be more profitable to ask “Why not me?”

What opportunities do we have for doing God’s work? Have we got time we could give? What are our talents? If God has made us good at particular things, presumably He has done so for a reason. We can use our gifts for good or ill, for our own selfish gratification or even let them go to waste altogether. It is our choice how we use the abilities and opportunities God has given us. What about our financial resources? Do we regard our money as a gift from God and do we consider how we can use it to do His work in the Church and the world?

These are things we have to consider as individuals, but we may also be guided by other people. Friends or family might encourage us to take a particular course of action. Sometimes complete strangers may say something that makes us think about the possibility of doing some particular thing. It is part of our shared responsibility as a Christian community to encourage one another to develop and use our potential in God’s service.

We certainly pray for guidance as to what we should do each day and how we should use the opportunities each day brings as well as what we are to do with the rest of our lives. Sometimes we may indeed experience the sense that God is calling us in a particular way but we have to be humble enough to examine that sense of vocation in the light of the Scriptures and the teaching of the Church as well as the advice of trusted friends and spiritual guides.

What I hope we have shared today is a sense of what a great privilege it is to be a Christian, a sense of wonder at what God has done for us, a burning desire to offer Him our very souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice, and an openness to the possibilities of what you and I can do to glorify God’s holy Name and to build up His Church.

Finally, I will commend to you the Prayer Book Collect for last Sunday, the first after Epiphany.

*O LORD, we beseech thee mercifully to receive the prayers of thy people which call upon thee; and grant that they may both perceive and know what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to fulfil the same; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*