

## **Listen for God's call**

A sermon preached by the Revd William Whyte on Sunday 23 January 2022

*Refs: Nehemiah 8.1-3,5-6,8-10; 1 Corinthians 12.12-31a; Luke 4.14-21*

Today's Gospel really hit home to me. My elder son is 12. Because his mother's Jewish, that makes him Jewish. And because he's nearly 13 that means he's preparing for his Bar Mitzvah, the moment when he will read the Torah and then preach on it in Synagogue.

It's an extraordinarily exacting business. He has to learn Hebrew well enough to read it, of course. But he also has to memorize the remarkably complex system of musical notation in which each letter, each word, and each phrase seem to have their own particular tone. And he has to do this while reading a scroll which does not show any vowels or punctuation. It's all meant to be training for a lifetime of standing up in Synagogue, reading – intoning – the text and then interpreting it; something every Jewish man is called to do.

The modern form of synagogue worship really dates from 400 or 500 years after Christ. But the account in today's Gospel in which Jesus, in his home Synagogue, is called on to read and interpret the text is instantly recognizable and utterly convincing. Even the text he reads is (apparently) exactly right. Week by week, the Jews of his age did read the prophecies of Isaiah and then seek to unpack their meaning.

In that sense, one of the things that this reading does is to remind us that Jesus' ministry began in a literally Orthodox way. He, like so many before and since, did his duty in Synagogue, reading and preaching the word. The critical difference is, of course, is what happens next.

Jesus reads the words from Isaiah and then – shockingly, boldly, outrageously – announces that they describe not some distant event, but here and now; not some promised king to come, but him – the man standing in front of them, Joseph the carpenter's son. We know what happens after that, of course. The people of Nazareth are appalled. They are angry. They plot Jesus' death. And he can do nothing. The whole chapter is in fact concerned with Jesus' weakness in and rejection by his home town.

There's a good reason that this story of rejection by his own people was paced at the start of Jesus' ministry in the Gospel of Luke. In microcosm, it depicts his whole life on earth. He comes to his people. He speaks truth. He amazes and astounds them. But they turn on him and seek to harm him. What happens at the start of his ministry in Nazareth faithfully prophesies what will happen at the end of his life in Jerusalem.

Like so much of the Gospels, this story about Jesus isn't just about Jesus. It's also about us. Because it tells us something really significant about our own calling – our vocation – as Christians.

When people talk about vocations, they often make it sound as though that's something a little like a lottery win. You're passing time, minding your own business, and then God Suddenly singles you out – a holy hand appears, and (as they used to say) 'It could be you'.

What today's reading makes plain is that a vocation is less an event than a process. You may feel a vocation, but it might not be the right time or place to express it. More likely, you may feel you absolutely don't have a vocation, but then the circumstances arise when you are absolutely the right person in the right place to do the right thing.

That was true for Jesus in our Gospel. He was called to preach the word – to be The Word – but Nazareth was not the right place and this was not the right time to live it out. He needed to move on.

More than that, as we read in our Epistle, there is not one Christian vocation, but many; not one way to serve God, but many. And our vocation will change as we change, as we move or grow. The vocation from one stage in our life will not be the same as in another.

We need to be attentive – attentive and brave. We need to look out for opportunities, to listen for God's call, and be willing to do what's right. We need also to be prepared for it not to work. It might not be the right moment. We might not be the right person. But we should take comfort from Jesus' story there, as well. Rejected by his own people; crucified instead of crowned: Jesus' life and work look like failure. We know they weren't – and the mere fact of our meeting here 2,000 years later show that they weren't.

God can make success out of failure and saints out of ordinary people. If we'll let him, in the right time and right place, God will even make saints out of us. Amen.