

God's call

A sermon preached by Revd Viv Bridges at St Peter's 12 February 2019 on the 4th Sunday before Lent
Refs: Isaiah 6.1-8, 1 Cor 15.1-11, Luke 5.1-11

The very clear theme linking our three readings is God's call.

Isaiah gives a very clear description of his calling. He must have been terrified by his extraordinary vision, recognising his own sinfulness and vulnerability. At that time it was thought that if anyone saw God, they would die. But God had special things in store for Isaiah, and when God calls, He doesn't take "no" for an answer. God quickly answers Isaiah's protestation about being unworthy - with a live coal! By touching Isaiah, God took away his guilt and past sins, and then continued to give him the strength he needed throughout his ministry.

In our Epistle, St Paul mentioned very briefly his own calling, and how he'd been able to carry it out. He reminded the Corinthians of his experience on that Road to Damascus. Paul was acutely aware that, as Saul, he had once persecuted Christ's followers. But he was obviously forgiven and provided with the strength to carry out Christ's purpose for him. Throughout his letters, Paul insisted that all the things he had done had not been in HIS strength, but in God's. 'It was not I, but the grace of God that is with me'.

The Gospel reading tells the story of Jesus calling Simon Peter. Peter also was overcome with fear, with a sense of his own sinfulness, but Jesus said, "don't be afraid". Although we continue to read about Peter's particular weaknesses throughout the Gospels, Peter went forward in renewed strength after Jesus had left this earth - in the power of the Holy Spirit - and did amazing things.

So it seems that God calls all sorts of people to do his work - not the perfect or particularly gifted, or the people who look to be called. Sometimes he calls those who have violently fought against him! God chooses people for the potential he sees in all of us.

At Sarah (Flashman)'s licensing, Assistant Archdeacon Peter Groves preached a beautiful sermon about the fact that we are all called by God. We had the same reading from Isaiah at that service so I wondered if there might be a ready-made sermon for me to use! Of course this never works, but Peter's affirmation that God calls every one of us reflected what I had thought I might say today.

It's clear that being called can have its own difficulties. Like Isaiah, Paul and Peter, we can sometimes be frightened by what God seems to want us to do. Our first reaction may well be "I can't do it". This can be a way of opting out because we're too nervous of saying "Yes" to God, too fond of our own comfort. It may be that we really do feel too sinful, too weak, or that we don't have the necessary skills. But there are many people who, like Isaiah, Peter and Paul, feel that initially, but when they do say "Yes", God does amazing things.

If necessary, God finds a way of taking away our sense of guilt, unworthiness. It's not that we suddenly become sinless and worthy. Although God freely offers us forgiveness for our sins, he doesn't wave a magic wand so that we never sin again. We shall all, always, go on sinning. It's just that this isn't what matters. What does matter is that we remember God loves us despite this, will always forgive us when we ask for forgiveness and put things behind us. If we don't put them aside, they can weigh us down, hold us back from doing all that we're capable of. God forgives us so that we can go forward unburdened and get on with the job he has for us.

We often fear we aren't going to have the skill or strength to do what he asks us. But he is there to give us what we need to do the job we're asked to do. Not just St Paul or St Peter, all the saints recognise that

everything they do is through God's grace and power. When we say "Yes" to God's call, the Holy Spirit will give us everything we need to achieve it.

One difficulty that isn't flagged up in our readings today is the problem of discernment. We may feel totally committed to Jesus Christ, ready to say "Yes" to his call, and turn to the Holy Spirit for strength and guidance. But God doesn't always make it obvious what he wants us to do, so we have to go on praying for guidance.

Sometimes he does make it very clear - perhaps because we have a particular talent or gift. If we're good at arranging flowers or playing music or love cleaning, if we sense a gift for teaching in Sunday school or in leading worship (endless gifts that God has up his sleeve to give us), then it might be quite clear we should offer our time to his work in doing these things. And yes! - I am well aware that we are in our Time and Talents Stewardship campaign. This is not why the readings are as they are - they are the Lectionary readings set for today. So *once again* we are reminded of the way in which God can work in order to further his Kingdom. It's not surprising that we have such appropriate readings at this time.

The examples I've given (and I'm sorry that I couldn't include all the particular gifts we might have as individuals) were about 'doing - action'. We live in a society in which worth is measured by what we can do, what we achieve. So although I want to encourage you all to get more actively involved in church life if you can, I feel it's important to say that if anyone has listened to sermons or read the Time and Talents booklet, but feels - I genuinely can't do any of these things - don't feel you're not valued. This is made clear in the booklet.

There are many reasons why we might not be able to be active in church life. We may know that we are called to a ministry of quiet, contemplative prayer, so offering time for praying for the needs of the Parish is our calling. Or we may be unwell, coping with major difficulties of one sort or another, or frail. I believe it can be very difficult to accept that God is calling us to do less, to be less active. It can be hard when you've been active and involved for many years to sit back and let others get on with the things we can't do any more. This is something I experience. We have a wonderful example of this 'changing' call in John the Baptist. Once he had recognised Jesus as the Messiah, the one he was preparing the way for, John acknowledged that his role would decrease. We hear very little about him after Jesus' baptism until his death, a death caused by his determination to remain absolutely faithful to Jesus Christ.

We have another example of simple faithfulness being a wonderful gift in Simeon and Anna. Sarah preached at Candlemas about them as 'the quiet ones' waiting for many years in the Temple. They hadn't gone out and done amazing actions to spread the Gospel, but by waiting faithfully, looking in the right direction, they were among the first to recognise Jesus as the Messiah. Being faithful, being open to Christ's presence, is something we can all aim for.

Whoever we are, we must be ready to hear God's Call, and offer him all that we are. This call will change as time goes on, so in order to discern God's will, we need always to take the trouble to listen and be open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. He may be calling us to be more active, using our gifts and talents, and he will give us the strength to do this. He may be calling us to be less active, to spend more time in prayer and study. Or he may be calling us to keep trusting him when life becomes difficult, seemingly impossible, because of illness, or age, or painful circumstances. Whatever God calls us to do, by keeping faithful to him, watching out for him, we all witness to his love and compassion and so take part in spreading his kingdom of love.

Amen.