

## On Vocation

A sermon preached by *Dr Tony Lemon* at St Peter's, Wolvercote, at 8.00am and 10.00am on Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> April 2012

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Today is 'Vocation Sunday' – a designation which I haven't been aware of in previous years. Why does it appear at this point in the church calendar? If we think of vocation not in relation to jobs and careers, but in terms of destiny, then perhaps it makes sense so soon after Easter. The Passion was, after all, in a real sense Jesus' destiny. In one sense it was an inescapable destiny. Yet in his Gospel John is concerned to witness to the truth that through all the events of the passion and resurrection, the true agent is Jesus himself: his active will turned what otherwise might have been a blind fate into a self-offering and self-sacrifice. This in itself underlines the true nature of vocation: whilst it may be what is destined for us, it is ultimately a matter of choice on our part – a choice that depends first of recognition and secondly on acceptance – though we probably respond less consciously than this suggests to many elements of vocation in a wider sense.

I should like to think about vocation in three ways this morning. The first is probably the one which most of us would immediately think of: we tend to associate vocation first and foremost with employment and careers, and particularly with those which are seen to be particularly beneficial for society, often jobs that involve a degree of material self-sacrifice: priests and missionaries, teachers, nurses and doctors, social workers, overseas aid workers are all jobs which we have no difficulty in recognising as having a vocational element. We don't generally think of advertisers or estate agents as having a vocation, and – particularly since 2008 – the same probably goes for bankers! The problem with this, from a Christian standpoint, is that it excludes the great majority of humanity. What about peasants and farm labourers, factory workers, shop assistants, office workers, cleaners and bartenders? Of course it is true that some people have a strong sense of vocation and choose to pursue their chosen career with varying degrees of selflessness. But most people have limited choices open to them, and many are of course only too glad to have work of any kind – mundane though often hard work with no glamour and little obvious reward. A truly Christian sense of vocation is perhaps that which is captured by George Herbert in his well-known hymn: 'A servant with this clause makes drudgery divine: who sweeps a room as for thy laws, makes that and the action fine. This is the famous stone that turneth all to gold.' I remember those words puzzling me in school assembly, but I realise now how important their message is. True vocation, as far as employment is concerned, is to be found not only in what we do, but also – and for most people more critically – in how we do it, the attitude which we bring to it. In our Gospel this morning Jesus draws a distinction between the shepherd whose sense of vocation is such that he will ultimately be willing even to lay down his life for the sheep – by no means far-fetched at that time given threats from wolves and robbers – and the shepherd who is merely a 'hireling' – for whom it is just a way of earning money. Of course true shepherds can be hirelings too, but they bring an altogether different level of commitment to the job. True vocation involves a desire to serve: Jesus, as the one true ruler or shepherd of God's people, is yet the servant of all – the 'suffering servant' foretold in Isaiah.

Secondly, we can think about vocation as something outside the jobs we do – and many of us, of course, don't have jobs anyway. Vocation can embody an attitude to life, to people and to activity: something we bring to the organisations we belong to, the groups and communities of which we are part, formally or otherwise. The church, and its many events, groups and organisations, is very much one of those organisations. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians

portrays the body of Christ as made up of many parts, all united in the one Spirit. This image suggests a kaleidoscope of different roles which each of us is called to, all of which combine together to form Christ's living body on earth. Just as all parts of the human body are necessary for it to function effectively, so all our individual roles in the church are necessary if it is to thrive. A remarkable number of people here at St. Peter's contribute to the life of the church, its groups and its regular and special events – some of them we pause to thank now and again, as we did recently at the AGM, while others quietly continue to contribute unseen, including many who may have no formal office or role but who may bring more than they realise to the life of the church. All bring their own sense of vocation to what they do to keep this church alive as a thriving part of Christ's body.

A third way of thinking about vocation may seem surprising, such is the strength of the association we make between vocation and work. But I think it is also helpful to think of vocation in a more personal sense. We all have a vocation or calling to become more truly ourselves before God. That may sound strange – what else can we be but ourselves? Yet isn't it true that all human beings are some of the time playing a role which goes down well, acting a part which we feel pressured to maintain? Maybe we have learnt from painful experience that we cannot afford to be our true selves, or we may struggle to overcome the way we have been programmed to think of ourselves. Human behaviour is conditioned by what enables people to belong, to feel accepted, to gain the approval of others, and almost unconsciously we respond to these urges. But if we are truly to discover what God wants us to be and to do, part of the journey will involve honestly struggling to get beyond the people we have been told to be, the people we feel we are expected to be, the behaviour that we know wins approval, but rather to seek to uncover our real selves and not be afraid to be true to what we find in the way that we behave.

It is an obvious yet remarkable thought that we are all different. There is simply no one else in the world who has been, is or will be like you or like me. Jesus, the good shepherd, knows us all individually: 'I know my own and they know me'. A good teacher knows all his or her pupils as individuals, and tries to treat them as such, understanding what each needs. Even in these days of assessment, targets and performance management, a good boss or line manager is not one who bullies and threatens to achieve targets and boost his own career, but one who recognises the strengths and weaknesses of each of his workers, and uses his understanding not to castigate or drive out those who are struggling, but to maximise their individual potential by developing their sense of self-worth and self-belief, giving them a desire to contribute and do their uttermost for a communal purpose that they see as worthwhile – to help them, in effect, to realise a sense of vocation.

To sum up then, Jesus calls us all as individuals, to seek a sense of vocation in our work, in our lives outside the workplace, and in finding and acting as our true selves – so that we can be true to ourselves and make the contributions for which we are most fitted, using the unique gifts with which God has endowed each one of us.