

Sunday 13 September 2009

Vocation for All

**Nic Denny-Dimitriou
Church of the Ascension, Hilton**

Readings – refer to sermon text

This main point to my sermon this morning is this:

Every one of us is a unique combination of gifts, abilities and temperaments thanks to our DNA, our upbringing and our life experiences, and it is in using our whole being that we serve God.

Sometimes, if someone is more egotistical, opinionated and boastful than we are, we say, “He thinks he’s God’s gift to the world”. Truth is, every one of us is God’s gift to the world, and we can genuinely be that without being boastful, opinionated or egotistical.

It is my intention that we can be inspired and encouraged to re-evaluate the way that we live, to be as much as God intended us to be – even whilst acknowledging that we have character flaws and that we all experience degrees of brokenness and damage caused by human sinfulness (our own sin and the sin of others around us).

I had several “starting points” planning this sermon:

One is a theme I’ve preached on before: Most of us express our faith significantly in and through the church – “church” understood both as buildings in which we meet for worship and other related activities, and as a community of people dispersed in the surrounding society who gather like this from time to time in the week (Greek word “ekklesia”, meaning the gathered community of God’s people).

However, we know that our “calling from God” is not only to acknowledge or worship God in a few limited contexts, but with the totality of our lives, including wherever we live and work and relate to other people.

Also, the gifts God has given us are not for use within the church alone. Some may be primarily expressed in that way, in building up the people of God as Paul puts it to the Ephesians, to become mature in the faith and to serve that community. But sometimes when “spiritual gifts” are discussed, there is an assumption that they must be used within the walls of the church or within the church community. What about God’s whole created world?

A second starting point was a book, read months ago when lent to me by a parishioner who had been greatly encouraged by it. Max Lucado is a prolific Christian writer, making things about our faith very accessible to “the person in the street”, though I had previously only read articles by him. This book, “Cure for the Common Life”, was a sufficiently good read that I then ordered my own copy.

I had an “Aha! Moment” when Max challenged the commonly stated line that “you can be anything you want to be”. I’ve liked – and still like – that statement for obvious reasons: Previous tight definitions of who could do what have slowly been rejected or altered, so it is good to have a line that says there is no barrier to what you can achieve. For instance, previously there were barriers of race, class, education or gender, which no longer apply or should not be barriers to a particular job.

But in reality, you cannot be “anything you want to be”. We all have some limitations, and even choosing a career based on certain abilities excludes us from following certain other careers. And there are some things I might desire to be, if I had the right skills and aptitudes, but I simply do not possess every aptitude necessary for every job.

That makes it imperative for people to consider what they are “cut out to be”, as the saying goes. Or as Max Lucado would have us ask: “Given my unique combination of DNA, experiences and passions, what is it that God has seemingly intended me to be?” That is not only a question for a young person deciding what career to launch into, but for all of us at any age and stage of adult life.

The word “vocation” simply means “calling”, though it has often been used for certain jobs that require high levels of involvement with other people, often for low remuneration but with potentially high fulfillment in meaning and purpose. So teaching, nursing, being a priest or preacher or missionary or evangelist – these are some of the “vocations” as traditionally understood. [And our Diocese is hosting a morning in 2 weeks’ time at the Cathedral for any who may be wondering about a calling to ordained ministry.]

But it seems to me that defining vocation in that way is too narrow. Doesn’t the world also need...? Wow, the list of job descriptions needed could be endless, but let me list a few (almost arbitrarily):

Plumbers, farmers, grocers, doctors, technicians, builders, lawyers, fishermen, engineers, foresters, bakers, drivers, tailors, business specialists, salespeople, therapists, social workers, child care workers, mechanics, visionary leaders...

In case that sounds too serious, let me add a few for fun: Entertainers, sports coaches, ah yes, chefs and coffee merchants... now those are high callings 😊

And so the list could go on of the huge number of people and jobs that we need to make our community and our world work properly. [Let’s not get into the cynical spot of noting that when some of “those people” foul things up, they mess up the community and world accordingly; I’m sure that can apply to any one of us.]

God has made each of us uniquely, and we ARE a gift from God to the world around us. Fail to work out who and what we are, what we are meant to do, and the community loses out!

I'm going to highlight a few points from today's readings:

OLD TESTAMENT: 1 SAMUEL 3: 1 – 10

Hearing God calling us audibly in that way is rare!

Most of us are uncertain of those who casually say, "God spoke to me" (whilst eating their morning cereal perhaps)

Most of us shy away from such notions – it is out of our experience

Yet in friendship with God, many have the experience of a gentle, inaudible voice of calling, of working out what God intends for us

There are many ways in which that can happen:

- The Scriptures may point us in a particular direction or inspire us
- Others around us, watching what they do or listening to their comments about us
- Vocational guidance and mentoring and encouragement from others, in the light of what we are good at and passionate about

Even Samuel, who became a great prophet of God, had a mentor in Eli to explain who or what he was hearing and how to respond, when he was young and unaccustomed to it. We all need encouragement and mentoring at points in our lives, and not just when young.

Also, it was Eli who taught Samuel to say to God: "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening." That is a wonderful way of responding to God in any event, and of being open to God's leading or inspiration.

NEW TESTAMENT: ROMANS 12: 1 – 21

- Offer ourselves to God – highly significant. That is our worship! A few activities or rituals in church buildings, however deep and meaningful they are, are not the sum total of the worship of our lives.
- Paul highlights obedient service to God, assuming God's Spirit in us, and calls us a "living sacrifice" to God (i.e. not dead animal sacrifices as were common in religious rituals of the time, nor in a sense of performing rituals in the Temple for the sake of them, but living our lives in totality as an act of worship to God)
- Sober judgment – not thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought (I think that would imply, neither more lowly than we ought – a common human affliction)
- Once again, Paul uses the imagery of the body, all parts working together though each part looks different and has a different function
- He lists numerous gifts and encourages us to use ours according to the grace given to us

Paul goes on to speak of a different aspect of vocation – not only what we DO but who we ARE...

Love

Be sincere

Aspects of community living (too many to elaborate)

These are challenging words (e.g. re blessing those who persecute us)

Being willing to associate with people of low position, not being conceited – may be hard words for those of us with significant education and career achievements in our affluent middle-class society

This is a reminder that our primary calling is in relationship with God (friendship with God), and then reflecting that in how we live with others, who also have God-given humanity and reflect the image of God.

Contrary to our baser human instincts, we are to live at peace with others as far as possible, and to overcome evil – not with evil, but with good.

GOSPEL: JOHN 15: 12 – 17

Jesus, addressing his closest associates, says that if they obey him, they are not his servants but in fact are called friends (elaborate briefly).

[A sermon topic for another occasion: What are some of the meanings and implications of being “in friendship” with God?]

~~~~~

So, vocation / calling is not only about what we do – limited to a few apparently “special callings” such as in the church; and using our gifts is not limited to what people do in the church for the sake of the body of Christ. Vocation is about how we respond to God’s call to be in relationship together, and how we relate to every other one of God’s image-bearers.

This sermon has been thoroughly inadequate in exploring some of these points in greater depth, but no single sermon could accomplish that. Allow me to end with this short extract from Max Lucado’s book:

**Cure for the Common Life – Max Lucado  
W Publishing Group (Thomas Nelson Inc.), 2005  
Pages 27 – 29 (with sections omitted)**

God knew young Israel would need a code, so he gave Moses a love for the law. He knew the doctrine of grace would need a fiery advocate, so he set Paul ablaze. And in your case, he knew what your generation would need and gave it. He designed you ... Remember Peter’s admonition? “If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies” (1 Peter 4:11).

I encountered walking proof of this truth on a trip to Central America. Dave was celebrating his sixty-first birthday with friends at the language school where my

daughter was studying Spanish. My question – “What brings you here?” – opened a biographical floodgate. Drugs, sex, divorce, jail – Dave’s first four decades read like a gangster’s diary. But then God called him. Just as God called Moses, Paul, and millions, God called Dave.

His explanation went something like this. “I’ve always been able to fix things. All my life when stuff broke, people called me. A friend told me about poor children in Central America, so I came up with an idea. I find homes with no fathers and no plumbing; I install sinks and toilets and love kids. That’s what I do. That’s what I was made to do.”

(... page 28)

... A lot of well-meaning folks say, “God wouldn’t let me do what I like to do – would he?” According to Paul, he would. “God is working in you to help you want to do and be able to do what pleases him (Philippians 2: 13).

... As Thomas Aquinas wrote (he was a 13<sup>th</sup> C theologian), “Human life would seem to consist in that in which each man most delights, that for which he especially strives, and that which he particularly wishes to share with his friends.”

I recently met a twenty-year-old who needed to hear this. Just discharged from the military, he was pondering his future. He bore a square jaw, a forearm tattoo and a common question: He didn’t know what to do with the rest of his life. As we shared a flight, he told me about his uncle, a priest. “What a great man”, the ex-soldier sighed. “He helps kids and feeds the hungry. I’d love to make a difference like that.”

So I asked him... “What were some occasions when you did something you love to do and did it well?”

He dismissed me at first. “Aw, what I love to do is stupid.”

“Try me,” I invited.

“Well, I love to rebuild stuff.”

“What do you mean?”

He spoke of an old coffee table he had found in a garage. Seeing its potential, he shaved off the paint, fixed the broken legs, and restored it. With great pride, he presented it to his mom.

“Tell me another time,” I prompted.

“This one is really dumb,” he discounted. “But when I worked at a butcher shop, I used to find meat on the bones others threw out. My boss loved me! I could find several pounds of product just by giving the bone a second try.”

As the plane was nosing down, I tested a possibility with him. “You love to salvage stuff. You salvage furniture, salvage meat. God gave you the ability to find a treasure in someone else’s trash.”

**My idea surprised him. “God? God did that?”**

**“Yes, God. Your ability to restore a table is every bit as holy as your uncle’s ability to restore life.”**

**ENDS**