

Follow me!

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Second Sunday after the Epiphany—18th January 2015.
Reverend Robin Moore

John 1:43-51

+ In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen!

The stirring words of Hymn 687:

God gives us a future,
daring us to go
into dreams and dangers
on a path unknown.
We will face tomorrow
in the Spirit's power;
we will let God change us,
for new life starts now.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, says to Philip, "Follow me." It's not an order; it's an invitation, a very compelling invitation, a compelling and utterly life-changing invitation

Philip and, indeed, the other disciples who will make up the twelve, have absolutely no idea of what lies ahead; it is a path unknown. They show extraordinary faith and trust and courage.

What is it about this man Jesus that causes Philip, and the other disciples who will make up the twelve, to take this extraordinary step into the unknown, leaving behind family and friends, their livelihoods and all that is familiar and secure? What is it about him that is so compelling?

The words of Jesus throughout the scriptures are strong, yet gentle, calming, reassuring and loving: guiding, teaching, and at times, reprimanding. They are also challenging. He speaks with authority and a knowledge that is beyond understanding.

"Follow me." "Come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

and,

"Peace be with you. My peace I give to you. Do not be afraid. Do not let your hearts be troubled."

Philip, fully aware that he has found the long-awaited Messiah (and how powerful is that!) hurries to share this news with his rather skeptical friend Nathanael, very likely later referred to as the disciple, Bartholomew.

"Come and see." Philip confidently extends this invitation to Nathanael, to come and see Jesus and to make up his own mind about him.

On reading this passage from John's Gospel, the words of Jesus to Philip—follow me—and Philip's invitation to Nathanael—come and see—are powerful and cause me to reflect on my own calling. I want to share my story with you, but I've struggled to summarise a long journey into such a limited time frame.

I first want to say that we are all called to Christian ministry and that calling takes many, many, forms. It is certainly not restricted to people wearing funny collars!

My calling starts with the little girl, who felt deep distress at the sight of people being ridiculed or marginalised, or suffering in any way. She loved the natural world, in all its diversity and complexity. She grew up next door to a large Catholic family and liked the seamlessness that existed between their church life, their faith and the nitty-gritty of everyday life. Off to confession they would go each Saturday afternoon, the girls clutching their lace head coverings, hastily flinging them onto their heads at the church door; and then, sins having been confessed, it was off to the pictures—all so seamless.

The little girl in this story went to a beautiful old Anglican church and truly loved that church, but it felt very middle class to her, even at that young age. Her clothes were uncomfortable and formal. It all seemed somehow separated from the everyday stuff. Where were the shabby people? Where were the poor people? She knew that other people were caring for them and helping them and ministering to them, but where?

And so, I grew up and trained as a nurse at an Anglican hospital in Sydney. I cared for all patients, but was strongly drawn to those from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds, although my passion was for theatre work. Later, while working in theatre in one of the major Sydney hospitals, on night shift, I was scrubbed up for a long haul while surgeons painstakingly repaired the slashed wrists, throat and chest of a young man who had tried to take his own life. Our role was to repair the physical damage, but I was acutely conscious of this act of desperation and hoped and prayed that his emotional, mental and spiritual needs would be met.

Later in a small, busy, country hospital, I set up for an anaesthetic in the labour ward, for an instrument delivery. The little baby girl was fragile and it was decided that she should be baptised straight away. The feisty redheaded midwife thrust a small bowl of water in my direction, and said, “Here, you know more about this than I do!”

Well, a poor recommendation if ever there was one, as she knew absolutely nothing about it! Unprepared and ill equipped, I baptised this precious little soul and I’m pleased to say that she lived. I have no idea whether that baptism was ever recorded, but I have no doubt that it was well recorded with God.

Many years later in Canberra, I struggled with all the heated public debate over the ordination of women. I became disillusioned and while I never lost faith in God, I started to distance myself from the church in general. I was hurt and bewildered and felt betrayed, but there was always a deep spiritual longing to be back and this was very intense at times, particularly times such as Christmas and Easter. I felt compelled to attend services at those times.

Time passed and I found myself searching for something that was difficult to define. I was no longer nursing and was occupied with some personal goals and family commitments, but there was something missing; an indefinable and elusive something; something that always seemed to be just out of reach.

Finally, one day in desperation (and it recall it quite clearly) I was standing in the bathroom looking in the mirror at the time, and I prayed, fervently, “Please God, there must be something. Whatever abilities I may have—there must be something!”

Very soon after that, I was in church here at St Philip’s and David Oliphant, the Rector, had received a call from people in nearby public housing asking for the church to run a free food program. The clients included people on the margins with issues such as poverty, mental illness, alcoholism, physical illnesses, drug addiction, issues related to violence and other

considerations. I actually knew of this call several days earlier and so on that day, here at St Philip's, without hesitation, I went to David and said, "I think that is something that would interest me."

(Nineteen years later)

Be very careful what you pray for!

The community work was a steep learning curve.

For some years, I had felt drawn to the vocational diaconate, the servant ministry of deacons, particularly ministry among the poor and marginalised. I treasured any brief conversations on the subject and once attended a public session during a deacons' conference here in Canberra. I so wished that I had the necessary qualities, but that was not possible; it was just a pipe dream.

Over the years I became increasingly involved in the community work. There was, and is, a strong sense of walking in the footsteps of Christ. No task demeaning. Not easy, often challenging and complicated, but it felt right.

The sense of feeling drawn to diaconal ministry remained. The community work was diaconal in nature and I had a Bishop's Lay Ministry License. I had well and truly returned to the church.

One day here at St Philip's in the church vestibule, I saw some booklets on the vocational diaconate. I took one and sat in the car outside and read it. It was very confronting for me. For the first time ever, the very real possibility of me becoming a deacon was put to me. It was a massive jolt. I felt Jesus was saying, "You've thought about it for years, you've talked about it often enough, you've prayed about it, *so what now what are you actually going to do about it?*"

I was shaking, my heart was pounding! We sat there in the car for ages, the booklet and I—uncomfortable companions; the booklet occupying the front seat beside me. It felt as though we were eyeing each other off, looking quickly at one another then, just as quickly, averting our gaze! I wanted to pretend that I hadn't seen it and I wanted to get back to the comfortable and familiar, but somehow I couldn't. It was extremely confronting. There was an invitation to ring one of several people listed, inviting the reader to come and discuss vocational ministry. Again, an invitation from Jesus, "Come."

It was a compelling invitation, and I thought, "Well, it can't do any harm just to make a 'phone call; it is just a 'phone call, and then I can go back to where I was." I rang Archdeacon Anne Ranse, Archdeacon to the Diaconate, and she suggested that we meet. I thought, "Well it can't do any harm to meet with her; and it would be very interesting to hear about diaconal ministry, then I can go back to where I was."

I met with Anne. She was calm, very encouraging and wise. She spoke with quiet authority. The next step, she said, was for us to meet with the bishop. That day, as I was leaving, it felt as though her arm was around my shoulders and that she and others were travelling with me and guiding me along the way. It was an extraordinarily, reassuring feeling. I no longer felt alone.

I knew that whatever happened, whatever the future held, I could never go back to where I was; I was, forever, changed. I started to feel an inner excitement—it was like a secret love. Jesus had jolted me into a whole new possibility.

Come follow me; do not be afraid.

Take my yoke upon you ...

for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

Christ, whose insistent call
disturbs our settled lives:
give us *discernment* to hear your word,
grace to relinquish our tasks,
and *courage* to follow empty-handed
wherever you may lead,
so that the voice of your gospel
may reach to the ends of the Earth. Amen.