

Sermon for Fifth Sunday of Epiphany, 4th February 2007 St Philip's O'Connor

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On Friday morning, I attended the 40th anniversary of Bishop George Bowning's ordination. At that service was a man (a member of St John's) who recalled that it was the 81st anniversary of his baptism! I thought, "How amazing that he would remember that!" So I decided to look up my own baptism card. I found that I was baptised on the 19th of September in the year of my birth!

Baptism and ordination indicate to me God's call, a theme of the readings today:  
the call of Isaiah, through his experience in the temple,  
the call of Paul, through his experience of the risen Christ, and  
the call of Simon Peter with James and John, and the amazing catch of fish.

Baptism marks the acceptance of a journey of faith, begun possibly by ourselves as adults, or begun on our behalf by our parents and godparents.

Ordination is a call within a call, to a particular role among the baptised people of God; not a call to be better but a call to a particular role of leadership—and then, of course, consecration as a bishop is also to a role of leadership. But I like to believe also that scripture teaches that each of us is called to a particular role with the Christian family, and that the ordained person has a role in guiding and discerning.

I say this as I look to the year ahead and as we begin to reflect on how St. Philip's might operate as a parish. I know that one of my greatest failings is to let people off the hook with regard to their responsibilities and to say, "It's okay. I'll do it." And then I find I'm spending time doing the things others could do and not doing what I should be doing! I wonder if I hold the reins too tightly and stifle people's efforts at ministry. If I do, it's only because I want things done well! Please tell me!

So as we look towards the year 2007 and begin our planning with the annual general meeting on Sunday the 25th, I encourage you to think about the call of God. What does our baptism mean? What part do I play in this St Philip's family, or what part might God be calling me to play?

The Isaiah story and the gospel story of Simon Peter begin with theophanies (appearances of God in visible form) — in Isaiah, the smoke, strange creatures and the vision of the Lord; in Luke's gospel, the wonderful catch of fish. (Theophanies don't always mean that the building shakes, smoke billows and angels fly around. They quite often occur in much less dramatic ways!)

In each case, the recipients are aware of their shortcomings. Isaiah says, "Woe is me, I am lost, I am a man of unclean lips." Simon Peter says, "Go away from me, Lord, for am a sinful man." Paul recalls his experience of the risen Christ and recognises his unworthiness, "for I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God." But in each case the message is of forgiveness for failings and strengthening for the task!

But I would also like to add that when we read this Gospel today some of you, like me, will feel a little guilty because we didn't set off to some foreign land as missionaries! I often ponder the fact that God might actually call us to be where we are,  
that God's call is the place where we work,  
that God's call is to our school,

that God's call is to our family,  
that God's call is not to run off on some great project, but to respond to Jesus where we are.

Our lovely daughter, Jane, has adopted a fairly alternative lifestyle and is a body piercer – ear studs, nose rings, and the like. Now I know that that's not what every parent wants for their child, but I feel better that Jane is doing this job because I know that she is exceptionally careful and good at what she does. So I feel good, because I know her clients will get good care.

But isn't that what God is calling us to be — to be the best at what we are?

So there's the challenge as we ponder the call of Isaiah, of Paul, and of Simon Peter. What about our call in our everyday, in our Christian family?

God's calling refocuses us from ourselves towards others. So it was with Isaiah, with Paul, and with Peter and the others.

Not all are called to greatness, but through our baptism we are all called to be disciples. Living out this call is not about great and wonderful spiritual experiences, but about doing what we need to do in our daily round:

generosity of volunteers,  
care for our partners,  
faithfulness in suffering of the sick.

We are not made worthy by how we respond.

We are made worthy simply by the fact that it is God who calls us.