

The Calling

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, Year C, 5 February 2022

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St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

Isaiah 6: 1-8; Psalm 138; 1 Corinthians 15: 1-11; Luke 5: 1-11

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

In these Sundays after Epiphany our readings show us various ways in which God is revealed to us. Today it's about the calling of prophets and apostles. But I should say at the outset that this doesn't make any sense apart from God's calling of the whole Church, and not just individuals set apart for particular offices. In the ordinal of our Anglican sister, the Episcopal Church of the United States, we're given the salutary reminder that the Church's ministers are lay people, deacons, priests and bishops—starting with lay people; starting, that is, with baptism. It's not just the official three roles; it's not just what one bishop I know used to call the uniformed branch.

Still, even the most Protestant and the most Pentecostal, the least Catholic among us, typically recognise the necessity of ordained ministry, or at least its practical inevitability. And it has ever been thus. The earliest Churches, those we read about and hear from in the New Testament, never existed as communities without apostolic leadership, and without those set apart by the apostles through the laying on of hands.

These days we're very aware of clergy and bishops who've disgraced their office, the Church and themselves but, worse, they've damaged vulnerable children and adults in their care. So, the attitude has to be got right, and careful checks have to be made. Psychological tests and regular reports are now required for theological students, with careful selection processes at each subsequent stage in ministry, and for each Church appointment, yet still we can get it wrong.

Today in our readings we see some aspects of this process of calling in its proper, healthy form, and I want to take a walk with you through some of the things I notice.

The first thing I notice is that calling to ministry begins with some sort of personal reality. Isaiah's prophetic call took place in the temple

liturgy, and an older generation of priests can testify to a sense of priestly calling that grew up in worship when they were boys. Anyway, Isaiah encountered God in the liturgy and that encounter became a calling. Paul testifies to the Corinthians that last of all in the revealing of his resurrection, Jesus revealed himself to Paul “as to one untimely born.” And Peter is called with his fellow fisherman in today’s Gospel through that eventful night out at sea with Jesus.

Of course, this personal calling thing can seem a bit much. I remember hearing a priest telling us that a disembodied voice on a Melbourne tram had said to him, “I want you to be a priest in my Church.” Well, good luck to him, and I daresay there have been times when my clergy colleagues here would have appreciated something as definite as that. I’ve also heard enough of a certain Evangelical story of calling, which makes much of how reluctant the person was and how God had to keep at them—the subtext probably being that God considered them to be absolutely indispensable, as they no doubt considered themselves. I’ve also had to deal with theological students whose strong personal sense of calling thoroughly escaped the rest of us, and thankfully most of these fell by the wayside before it was too late—before they got ordained and then inflicted themselves on unlucky parishioners forever.

I'm sure my clergy colleagues here have a variety of stories to tell about their own sense of calling, and one day they might share them with you if you're genuinely interested. For me it was nothing dramatic, and it grew through my childhood and adolescence. I remember a few moments that stood out. I won a Sunday School Prize—naturally—and they gave me *The Children's Book of French Saints*. I read it over and over, finding it fascinating and enticing. There was Religious Education once a week at Geebung Primary School, with the local curate who simply read C.S. Lewis's Narnia stories to us, which became the highlight of my school week. There were confirmation classes at age 11, with this same curate, then first communion followed by training and regular service as an altar boy—which, as I said, was a standard path to the priesthood for many boys of my vintage in the Catholic tradition of our Church, though that world's now almost entirely gone. Eventually, as a 21-year-old science graduate, I developed an overwhelming sense that I wanted to further deepen my search to understand reality by studying theology properly, having started reading it privately. They asked me in Brisbane when I lined up for selection why I was seeking to be a priest, and I said that I wanted to spend my life coming to grips with the gospel and sharing it with people—an answer that I'd still give today, by the way, 40 years on.

None of this is dramatic or supernatural, but it does point to growing up with God and into God. It's this sense of life with God that we see in our Psalm today: thankful, personal, tested and proven through some difficulties in life, and something the psalmist wants to share. This is why we should never look for things like talent or a good speaking voice or stage presence, or a desire to help people, or whatever, when we're thinking if someone might make a good priest—let alone focus on their business skills or management potential when we're looking for a bishop. The real question is about their life with God—is their God real, and are they real, and do they have something personal with God that they can help make personal for us.

Something else I notice in our readings today is that none of those who are called rush forward with a sense of entitlement. They all respond with some good old-fashioned fear of God—not fear of judgement or disapproval but a proper concern about whether they have it in them to do it, whether they can do justice to the wonder and the love and the beauty of it all. Isaiah laments that he's a man of unclean lips and that all his people have unclean lips. Paul testifies that he once persecuted the Church, so that he couldn't be less qualified to be an apostle. Peter is overcome and falls at Jesus's feet, testifying to his sinfulness.

Having worked a lot with theological students and having had my own doubts about being ready in the leadup to my own ordination, I recognise this prudent and spiritually healthy reserve, and I'm always very suspicious when I don't see it. In my own case it had to do with a sense of theological unpreparedness, feeling that I needed to work a lot more things out. So, since I was young and unattached and could manage it financially, I asked my bishop for an extra year to do more undergraduate subjects to round out my theological education, then for a further year to do honours. After my ordination I went straight on to doctoral study, all so that I could be better prepared—though by then I'd realised that my calling was to be a theologian as well as a priest. I'm always saddened when theological students resent their studies and can't wait to get out of college, as if they've got it all worked out. Which they then proceed to prove untrue by confidently preaching a lifetime of vacuous sermons to their prisoners.

It's appropriate that we never over-rate ourselves in ministry. Paul for one is happy to admit in our Epistle today that anything he achieved came by God working through him. And every good priest can testify thankfully to this sense of God's guidance and sustenance at crucial points in their ministry when people were relying on them. But Paul

and Isaiah and Peter all take heart and rise to the challenge—they don’t excuse themselves from the responsibility of ministry out of false humility or what they tell themselves is reserve. So, humility and confidence go together in ministry, but the right sort of confidence, not the confidence of a narcissistic ego, which in fact usually cloaks a deep insecurity. As René Girard once wrote, “the difference between a good priest and a bad priest is total but subtle.” I’d love to set that quote as an essay question for ministry students and see what they make of it.

Finally, friends, notice what all this is for. Isaiah is called to preach an unpopular message in dire circumstances. Paul sees himself as handing on a living tradition, about Jesus alive and changing the world and calling the Church to be part of that life, of that change. Peter and his fellow fisherman are called by Jesus to fish for people, and so the evangelistic die is cast. The Christian ministry is about all of those things, and we forget this at our peril—as do those clergy who effectively lose their faith and settle for mild social work, pottering about, embracing worthy causes, reading out sermons that they’ve got off the internet, and never helping anyone come to faith from one decade to the next.

So, there we have it. Christ's Epiphany extends to include the Church and its ministry. Among God's priestly people, some are called because they know and love God and they have both the humility and the confidence to put themselves in God's hands in sharing that knowledge, that love. Here we see a key aspect of how God's prophetic word speaks in the world, how the apostolic tradition is handed on, and how God fishes for people.

The Lord be with you ...