

A lifetime of callings

I want to offer a sideways glance at ageing from the point of view of calling.

The difference between Deism and theism is that whereas deism suggests that God began the world then left it like a clock to tick away, theism believes that God both began the world and is in every part of it sustaining life in space and time as well as into eternity. Yet to be honest we Christians, especially in our institution of Church, we sometimes give the impression that we are deists not theists. At times we try to exist without the help of God, and without his direct leading and guiding.

For example, although we know it's not true, we tend to restrict the word vocation to ordained ministry. I felt a vocation to the ministry – by which we mean ordained ministry. And when we look at the resources we spend, we do not have anything like the processes for lay vocations as for ordained. I am glad that Sue is addressing this as Director of Vocations, building on the work of her predecessor.

Some speak of church in rather posh terms as an ecclesial community. Although it sounds rather grand it actually holds a key to what the church is. Ecclesial means at its root, 'called' - ek klesia – called out and called together. Called out from the world as a sign of the Kingdom and called together to be the Body of Christ. This is not a deist one-off calling, it is a theist, all-the-time calling.

Richard Bewes one time Rector of All Soul's Langham Place in the centre of London was once asked by an impertinent young Christian of the charismatic movement, trying to score points over the conservative Anglican evangelical, – 'Vicar, I've received the second Blessing'. Richard Bewes looked at him with that lovely glint in his eye and replied 'Oh only two!'

Each of us was called into being and blessed with life. That is our first calling. And Richard Rohr, using Carl Jung, tells us that in the first half of life we are discovering the container of our lives. We are discovering: 'what makes me significant? How can I support myself, and who will go with me?' But then in the second half we begin to discover the content this container was meant to hold. He says, 'In other words, the container is not an end in itself, but exists for the sake of your deeper and fullest life'

Those of us who have gone beyond childhood and adolescence know the responsibilities in Christian terms of what that means – the contributing to the common good of society, family and communities; coping with learning about who we really are; purging our self importance and ego; learning to recognise the battles to fight and the projects to give our finite effort and energy and those to ignore; working out what are the worthwhile sacrifices and the unnecessary ones; the focus on the soul as well as the body. All these shape who we are and the maturity and integrity we portray.

Yet at each of these moments of growth in life, or stages of faith development as people like James Fowler like to describe them, God is there beckoning us on, calling us to new horizons, new human beings new 'human becomings', as Herbert McCabe writes.

And I've found this is not a linear process but a cyclical one.

One of my grandmothers brought me up while my mother went out to work. Gran was a devout person and often took me to church on a Tuesday as she did the cleaning of the brasses and Hoovering. At times she would leave me alone in the church, with strict instructions not to go into the holy of holies where the altar was, and I would sneak through the chancel rail into the sanctuary to see if God really would smite me. Happily he didn't seem to mind. In the afternoon she would sit with a cup of tea and read her Bible Reading Fellowship notes.

When I was ordained in Southwark Cathedral in 1984 she was the first of my family I shared the peace with and she beamed. Later, I was privileged to sit with her on her deathbed and read the 23rd psalm to her. And to complete that part of the cycle, in 1987 I was asked to write notes for the



Bible Reading Fellowship, which I did for 12 years. She was the voice of Eli for me and I was her Samuel.

And I love those voices of wisdom that stand in the Eli tradition. One who has become for me a laser guide is John Henry Newman, the 19th century English theologian. In his 'Meditations on Christian Doctrine', which he wrote in 1848 he says:

God has created me to do Him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission. I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next. I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. He has not created me for naught. I shall do good; I shall do His work.

I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place, while not intending it if I do but keep His commandments.

Therefore, I will trust Him, whatever I am, I can never be thrown away. If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve Him, in perplexity, my perplexity may serve Him. If I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve Him. He does nothing in vain. He knows what He is about. He may take away my friends. He may throw me among strangers. He may make me feel desolate, make my spirits sink, hide my future from me. Still, He knows what He is about.

Whatever circumstance, whatever vocation, whatever age, and Newman continued to serve God and the church right to his dying day, he did some definite service.

However there can be a danger in all this service of God, whether as a lay person or ordained and the danger is hubris. I have known colleagues over the years, and indeed to some extent have known it myself, who have received the praises of peers and elders encouraging, and creating expectations and sometimes even promising high office. Of course this is temptingly flattering and leaves an excited and highly affirming hope in a person. But beware of this Vanity Fayre, for flattery can so easily turn into hubris. Hubrism is a disease that flatters a person so much that it elevates them onto a pedestal. It distorts their persona by inflating their ego. It begins to grow them into monsters and dictators.

And so to expunge this disease and truly hear God's calling throughout life we might turn a prayer by another giant of English theology, John Wesley. In Wesley's famous covenant prayer he says this:

I am no longer my own, but thine.

Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.

Put me to doing, put me to suffering.

Let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee,
exalted for thee or brought low for thee.

Let me be full, let me be empty.

Let me have all things, let me have nothing.

I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal.

In conclusion, a deist God, who does not call would sit back and let nature take its course, and the survival of the fittest would win and older people would be despised as a drain on society, a burden on progress and a blockage in the system.

Newman and Wesley, who both lived well into their late 80s, knew and followed a living God who continues to call people right through their lives – calls into being, calls us into becoming, calls us to discover this container and calls us find its contents, calls us into service, calls us to a mission, calls us to be Samuels, calls us to be Elis for others, calls us to be employed, calls us to be laid aside, calls us at every stage, to life in all its fullness.

Rev'd Canon Dr Graham Dodds – October 2015



Receiving God's invitation to the vocational party

As a lay person helping other lay people to discern their perceived calling to ordination, it is only too easy to say, "I know that I don't have a vocation." But is this really true? After all, at the very beginning of an ordination service, and before speaking of ordination, the Bishop says,

God calls his people to follow Christ, and forms us into a royal priesthood, a holy nation, to declare the wonderful deeds of him who has called us out of darkness into his marvellous light. The Church is the Body of Christ, the people of God and the dwelling-place of the Holy Spirit. In baptism the whole Church is summoned to witness to God's love and to work for the coming of his kingdom.

It seems that there is no get-out clause for me, or indeed for any of us lay people. We are all summoned by virtue of our baptism - even if this took place when we were far too young to have any sense of the call.

We are all 'summoned', but how do we know what parts we are supposed to play? A few months ago, I asked a group of ordination candidates to 'find an object or picture that would help them talk about their sense of being called to ordination'. As I pondered the task, I realised that sitting on our mantelpiece we had an invitation to a wedding and that this spoke to me of how my own sense of calling and vocation has been played out. We are summoned, yes, but as with the parable of the Great Feast (Luke 14: 16-24), there is choice - it is an invitation. And, I want to suggest, we are invited to a party to which we are drawn and beckoned, rather than one we only attend out of duty. But, we do need to receive the invitation.



Scripture is full of people being invited. They are called and they are sent. Jesus said to Andrew and Philip, 'Come and See!' Energised and excited by what they have seen, they in their turn invite others. Andrew brought Peter to see what he had seen and Philip called to Nathaniel, 'Come and See.' And so, the first disciples are invited to 'Follow me' (John 1:35-51). Zacchaeus might have remained forever a watcher on the margins if he had not received his invitation to invite Jesus to tea (Luke 19:1-10). They are called to parties that they choose to go to. They do not go to the party dragging their heels. In what ways do I feel that I have been invited into following a vocational journey? How have I received my invitation?

Aged nine or ten, I received such an invitation that seemed to strongly beckon me. Watching a National Children's Home film strip, I knew that I wanted to be a housemother. I can remember the feeling of excitement, the sense of absolute certainty that this was what I would do 'when I grew up'. This bubble of certainty remained, only to be burst when, in my mid-teens, my headmistress told me in no uncertain terms that girls who went to grammar school did not become housemothers. Unwittingly, I am sure, she snatched the invitation away from me - and teaching was offered as a suitable alternative. What a sad end to such a glorious and exciting sense of calling!

Writing this piece of theological reflection has brought back to mind that initial strong sense of calling that was taken away from me, buried and seemingly never brought to fruition. What was it that had drawn me to the role? In that early sense of calling were there already seeds of the vocational journey that I have followed throughout my adult life? I seem to have always been drawn to and invited to roles of nurturing others, of seeking to enable others to flourish and blossom, whether as a mother, as a vicar's wife, as a facilitator of adult Christian theological education or in my present roles within vocational discernment for ordained ministry. One invitation was taken away from me, but it has been replaced by others that have encouraged and used those gifts that were perhaps already there in a fledgling form in my child-self.

There has been no such pre-visionsed certainty of vocation since that one of my childhood. Indeed, it could be said that my life-journey has been one of a meandering making use of the opportunities that have come my way as I have sought to 'see what God is doing and join in' (Rowan Williams). I have sought to accept the various differing invitations that I have been offered across

the years. And is this not so for most of us? Doors close and doors open before us. And it is often only in looking back that we can recognise the parties that we have really wanted to go to, the parties where we can really flourish, those doors that we go through where we and our gifts are most strongly enabled and that being so, where we can offer the fruits of those gifts to others.

I did train to teach, but it was readily apparent that class teaching was not a context that enabled me (or the children in my care) to flourish. But what a different picture emerged when I was invited to teach on a Diocesan theological education scheme. I gradually discovered that I could teach, for I seemed to have a knack of hospitality, of putting people at their ease, of listening, of asking questions that drew people into further reflection. These gifts that have been nurtured in this Diocese through teaching Christian Foundations and Exploring Christianity were only able to develop and flourish because someone in Lincoln had recognised the seeds and given me a first opportunity. It is only because a friend had noted my growing joy and experience in this work that I was invited to write and lead a programme of theological education for Anglican church leaders in Ethiopia. It is only because a former DDO once watched me teach that I was noticed and received my initial invitation into vocations work. My gifts have flowed from teaching into ever greater involvement in vocations. They have only been able to develop and flourish because, ever again, people have recognised seeds and given me opportunity.

For much of my adult life I have been privileged to follow a vocational journey where others have recognised, nurtured and enabled me to use my gifts of nurturing others. Primarily, I have heard God's call through the invitation from others within the Church. I have been privileged to be in a position where people have noticed me. What would have happened to my gifts if I had not been noticed, if I had not been given opportunities to discover, develop and exercise them? I have been noticed, but others aren't. What seeds of gifts within God's kingdom are squashed because individuals remain invisible?

Throughout the Gospels Jesus notices others. He scatters invitations at each and every turn. And later, on the Damascus Road, Saul responds to the invitation of the risen Christ. But would we have had St Paul and his Epistles if Barnabas had not invited him to Antioch (Acts 11:25-26)? It is not simply the task of the individual to respond to Christ's invitation, to seek, develop and exercise their own calling, if they can. The Church has a role to play. Each individual needs to be noticed and invited by the Church - to be given opportunity. Noticing, nurturing, enabling and developing gifts spread amongst the whole of God's people is an intrinsic part of the Church's calling as the Body of Christ. This calling to extend the invitation to others that they may find, follow and flourish within their vocation as members of the Body of Christ is to be exercised by each and every-one of us, individually and corporately, ordained and lay alike. And it has to begin by noticing each and every individual and the seeds of gifts that may lie dormant within them, for the invitation to flourish cannot be offered to any who remain un-noticed. And only so can we all, together, act as witnesses to God's love as we work for the coming of God's kingdom (Ordination Service).

Mary Witts - December 2021



What are you expecting?

There once was a man who was stranded on a desert island, with no hope of rescue or escape. He fell to his knees and cried out to God asking for a miracle. The next day a boat shows up to rescue him but the man politely declines the request, "No thank you, I have asked God to rescue me." The man still stranded on the island continues to wait for God to rescue him. The next day a helicopter lands on the island and offers the man an escape from off the island but again the man politely declines the request, "No thank you, I have asked God to rescue me." After being stranded on the island without food or water the man eventually dies. On coming to meet his Maker the man is not happy and says to God, "I have been praying to you for days asking for you to rescue me from the desert island, therefore why have you let me die?" God responds to the man, saying, "You asked me to rescue you from the desert island. On the first day I sent you a boat and you rejected it, on the second day I sent you a helicopter and you rejected it, what were you expecting?"



It is an old joke with many theological complications, but at the same time it highlights an area seldom explored when thinking about calling. *Expectation*. I believe it is both wise and essential when discerning God's calling on our lives to reflect firstly on our expectations. Thorough reflection on our expectations will enable the possibility of clearer navigation through the constant process of discernment. For example, what is my role in my calling and what is God's role? For some people, as they begin exploring what God is calling them to do on their journey as a disciple of Christ, they will set high expectations on the part of God, as clearly illustrated in the story of the man on the desert island. For others, the expectations on the part of God will be minimal. Regardless of whether or not a person sets high or low expectations, we all have expectations. Expectations which are fuelled by our previous engagement with Scripture, Reason, Tradition and Experience on our journey as disciples of Christ.

Furthermore, understanding our expectations enables us to see, through secondary lenses, where God may be calling us in ways that we could not previously have expected. The point is well made by Darrell L. Bock, who writes in his commentary on the Gospel of Luke, 'Things are not always as they seem. Sometimes what hinders our perception of what God is doing is our own expectation of what God should do or would do.' In other words, when we look to Scripture and see God actively working it appears that God works in ways which are contrary to the expectations of those in whose lives God is working (Gen 41-46; 1 Sam 16; Neh 2; Hos 1-3; Matt 11:1-19; Acts 9). Therefore, understanding our expectations broadens our horizons, to see through new lenses where God is speaking into our lives.

For example, growing up in a church tradition which expressed its worship and corporate faith in a very physical way, evident in its pursuit in the use of the gifts of the spirit (1 Cor 12), challenged me when my call to ministry did not come in that way. My faith had been fed and fuelled by an expectancy to see God move in a greater than normal way, in prophecy, words of knowledge, etc. Therefore, my expectation of how God was going to confirm to me this calling to the priesthood, was going to be with a big sign in bright lights, not in the small voice within me.

As I have reflected on my calling and my understanding of expectation, it became clear to me that we can often get caught up in the traditions that have developed our faith journey from the beginning and the comfort we find in how things have always been done. However, as I have found out, this often results in the wasting of time on the journey that God is calling us to go on. That being said, if we understand what our expectations are and how we are expecting God to commune with us in our lives, it enables us to keep our eyes peeled and our ears to the ground as we give God the space to call us in a way we may not expect. An example of this can be seen when YHWH speaks with Elijah in 1 Kings 19:1-13.

In 1 Kings 19:1-13, it can be seen that Elijah is terrified for his life, owing to the threats of violence and extermination levelled at him by Jezebel, Ahab's queen. Consumed by fear and terror, Elijah flees into the wilderness and asks YHWH to take his life from him, acknowledging that the people of Israel have failed in their

covenantal relationship with YHWH and by way of national attachment so has he, just like his forefathers. Therefore, as Elijah is in 'exile' just like his forefathers he is told by an angel of the Lord to go to the mountain of the Lord to meet with YHWH, and in the same way all his needs for the journey would be met. Arriving at the mountain of the Lord, the expectation that Elijah had, (based on the story of Moses at Sinai) would be that YHWH was going to communicate with him in a theophany, revealing his presence, but as Elijah experiences this theophany, he does not encounter God in the expected way. The thunder and lightning, the earthquake and the fire all come, but YHWH is not present, contrary to expectation. For it is the ruach, the breath, the whisper, the still small voice that causes Elijah to cover his face and walk into communion with God, to find out what God is calling him to do.

Just like Elijah approaching the mountain of the Lord, as we explore the calling of God on our lives we all will have expectations to see God move and God can and does honour those expectations, but we must also be aware of that God is a God who moves outside those expectations as well and therefore understanding our expectations, shaped by our traditions and comfort, may enable us to see God through a new lens.

In understanding our expectations we can experience a fresh perspective and understanding of not only the identity but the plans of God, in ways which reveal something new to us about God's self. Our expectations do not just affect how we may see, feel or hear God calling us, but also how God refines our relationship to and with him. Our expectations further influence our training, learning and calling to lifelong discipleship. Therefore, in the same way that understanding our expectations enables us to see through new lenses ways in which God is calling, understanding our expectations also affects how we implement that calling.

For example, when God revealed to me in an unexpected way my calling to vocational ministry and the priesthood, I still had specific expectations of how that calling was going to be implemented, developed and how my training and further education would proceed. My background, theologically and spiritually, led me to three options of where I thought that I would train for vocational ministry, but it was during a visit to a training institution that was completely outside my comfort zone that again I heard that small voice within me say where I needed to train. Unexpectedly, I trained in a place where I was forced to wrestle with the spiritual and theological tradition that had shaped my Christian walk so far but through which God revealed to me, equipped me and challenged me in ways that if I had only been waiting for what I was expecting I would have not experienced.

When thinking about calling as mentioned at the beginning of this reflection, I believe that it is fundamental to developing, discerning and understanding our calling that we understand and acknowledge our bias and our expectations, in order that we do not end up like the man on the island missing out on the opportunities that God, the author and perfecter of faith is providing for us in order to partner with him through the ministries that we are called to, both lay and ordained.

Steve Miles - December 2021

