

Sermon for Sunday 7th February 2010 - 'Vocation' (the sequel)

Last Sunday was kept as Vocation Sunday in the United Reformed Church: a day to reflect on the Christian calling, perhaps with special emphasis on callings to the various forms of ministry that exist within the church fellowship. In my sermon then, I spoke about calling in general terms - the way that God's call is often imperceptible, a series of nudges and seeming coincidences that lead us to a place that we recognise to be right for us, a place where he wants us to be. I talked a bit too about the more dramatic calls of which the Bible tells, of patriarchs and prophets and apostles, and we heard the vision of the prophet Isaiah, who saw the Lord in his glory and offered himself for the Lord's mission only after a glowing coal had touched his lips, signifying that he had been purified of his own and his community's failings. I went on to suggest four characteristics of a call, each reflecting an aspect of God's character as we know it: that a person cannot call him or herself, that a call singles one out, that a call can be accepted or refused, and that a call establishes a two-way commitment to the caller.

Elsewhere in the worship led jointly by Steven Best and myself, our focus turned to the many different ways by which we here at City Church in Cardiff respond to God's call to build a Christian community: on the varied but essential tasks that hold together like the crew and equipment of a ship. Last week's worship sheet had a space on the front cover reading 'What I like about City Church is ...', and you were invited to complete that sentence and bring the sheet back; so if you have done so, perhaps you could place it on a table in the vestibule when you leave so we can collect them and see which aspects of our ministry are most appreciated.

But Steven and I felt that it was difficult to do justice to the rich theme of Vocation on one Sunday alone. We resolved to broaden it out to two; and although Steve cannot be with us today, it has fallen to me to take things further, looking more specifically at God's call to the Scriptural offices of pastor and elder in the church, and at the uniquely URC position of the church-related Community Worker. We know that not everybody is called to those specific tasks, that so-called secular jobs and other aspects of normal life can be vocational, which is why we felt the need to lead into this by considering calling in its broadest sense. Yet ordained and commissioned ministry could be called the main thrust of Vocation Sunday, an invitation from the wider church to ponder whether God could be calling you, or maybe your immediate neighbour in the pew, to one of those important ministries without which the community cannot function at its best.

Let me start here with a paraphrase of what the Basis of Union of the URC, part of our fellowship's national constitution, says on the subject of ministry within the church. We hear parts of this read out whenever Elders are inducted, but there isn't always time then to stop and reflect further on what we hear. The Basis of Union speaks of how the community called to the service of Christ renders that service in worship and prayer, in witnessing to the Gospel, by caring within and outside itself, and by Christian discipleship. It speaks of church office as a way in which Christ uses particular gifts to equip the whole people to minister. It speaks of the pastoral oversight and leadership that Ministers and Elders share, of Ministers' conduct of public worship, preaching of the Word and administration of the Sacraments, of church-related Community Workers' role in discerning local community needs, their challenge to that community and prayer for its well-being.

One thing you will notice immediately, if you're at all familiar with our tradition, is that these functions overlap. Ministers are themselves not simply pastors but a species of elder too, and share in local leadership through the Elders' Meeting. Elders, and indeed others, may also lead public worship: I am not a minister, but our national Synod has authorised several Elders of City Church, including myself, to preside at celebrations of the Sacraments, particularly in view of our having no current full-time Minister. Church-related Community Workers are specialists in the relationship between local churches and the wider community where they are located; but they don't exist everywhere, so Ministers, Elders and others also seek to build such bridges. The differences between these offices lies therefore not so much in their purpose - our ultimate goal is the same - as in specialisation, training and focus. Ministers and Community Workers tend to be full-time and trained within church institutions, Elders bring to their ministry the experience of a worldly role or profession and balance their church service with other commitments. Ministers and Elders care for the full range of a church's life including its worship, Community Workers have a narrower remit within the community but greater engagement outside it.

All three of these tasks are rooted in a local church fellowship. It is the congregation that calls Elders by a process of election, and also the congregation which, having met a minister invited by its Elders to preach and become known locally, may call that minister as its pastor. The congregation also commissions Community Workers to serve as they do, supports them in their work, and constitutes one side of the bridge that Community Workers seek to build. A thoroughgoing consideration of vocation would consider not only the position of those who receive a call, but also of those through whom it is transmitted - in particular the Church Meeting, which is not, in that task, merely giving effect to individual preferences or dislikes but seeking to discern God's will under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Nor does the congregation's role end with a call or election: an office-bearer's ministry draws strength from his or her roots in the congregation, and needs the support, confidence and prayers of the congregation to continue fruitfully. Hence the points that I drew last week from Peter's comments about Eldership - as a task to be performed not by constraint but by consent; with enthusiasm, but not for personal benefit; and by example rather than domineering - points that today's Gospel reading reinforces, Jesus explaining to his disciples the concept of lordship through service.

But let us ration ourselves for now to considering Ministers and Elders. Even if it is the congregation that finally calls, we as a congregation do so recognising that God has called first; so for the individual, it is God's call that needs to be identified. There's no one way to do this. A first step in relation to full-time Ministry of Word and Sacrament is probably to learn more about it, by asking a Minister, by reading the informative material published by the United Reformed Church, later perhaps by attending a regional Vocations Conference. Trusted friends or family are probably the first people with whom a stirring in this direction will be discussed, and one shouldn't underestimate the common-sense feedback that can sometimes come from people who are not church members at all. Minister friends of mine in several denominations were quite surprised to receive encouragement from friends or local congregations to pursue an impulse that they originally considered very unlikely and far-fetched.

Eldership, which is full-time in the sense that one's responsibilities last so long as one serves and one's ordination lasts for ever, is nevertheless part-time in the sense that it does not prevent continued pursuit of a career or major responsibilities in the wider world. Eldership is therefore something that many more people consider, and each year around this time we invite people rooted in the life of City Church, perhaps already discharging an important specialist ministry like Junior Church or pastoral welcome or office support, to consider whether they might feel able to share in the overall oversight of our life together that Eldership entails. Those already ordained as Elders but not currently serving are equally encouraged to reflect whether this may be the time to come back. Here too there is literature available, but if you indicate interest to any of the present serving Elders we will see that your questions, both on the theory and the practice of this role at City, are answered.

So to round off these two Sundays' thoughts on general and specific vocation, but also (I hope) to begin a longer process of mulling the subject over in your minds, I turn again to today's scripture readings, particularly the first, the account of the acclamation of King Saul.

Saul represents a system of government that the people of Israel have chosen against the advice of their judge, Samuel. Samuel is the last of a line of judges – preachers and law-speakers for an otherwise republican commonwealth – but the neighbouring countries are monarchies and the Israelites believe that their greater emphasis on government under a ruling family is the key to success. The judges have had their disasters too, such as Samuel's predecessor Eli who fathered a pair of crooks and presided over a major military defeat. The first thing to notice, therefore, is that the system under which Saul will rule is itself an imperfect, typically human system.

The other thing to notice is the way in which the acclamation of the new King proceeds. Before the passage read today, the First Book of Samuel has already recorded how Saul came to consult Samuel about some missing donkeys of his father's, and how Samuel, at God's instruction, anointed him to the kingship. God had therefore chosen Saul well before he was presented to the people; and as a younger son he was not perhaps the most obvious choice. (A verse at the end of chapter 10, which we didn't hear, indicates that there were a number of dissatisfied people even after Saul had begun to reign.) Today's passage then takes the story on, with the people assembled at Mizpah: first Samuel reminds the Israelites that it was their decision, not God's, that they should have a King; but then he proceeds, by a process of lot-casting, to show them that Saul is indeed the divine choice. The next crucial step is for Saul to be acclaimed by the people: he stands before them and the vast majority, at least, cry 'Long live the King'. The system may be imperfect; but God's people have now affirmed the one they believe to be God's choice, and must live with the consequences.

The common thread between this and the second reading, in which after speaking of leadership as service Jesus goes on to speak of Peter's impending denial, is that both concern callings which some could have seen as mistakes. Jesus called as a leading disciple a man who would, in a moment of blind panic, deny that he ever knew him. The Israelites acclaimed as their first King a man who would in the end go mad with jealousy, and cling on to power long after he had lost the moral authority to hold it.

Imperfect people, serving, at least in Saul's case, within an imperfect human system. Things were always likely to go wrong, and as the later stories show, they did go wrong. But that is the whole point. God calls us for service in an imperfect world. The people, equally fallible, seek to discern as best they can whom God has called to lead them through that imperfect world. And failures notwithstanding, God watches over those he calls and those they serve. Saul's later reign was a disaster but as we know from David's lament, he was in the end only remembered for his good qualities. Peter did deny Jesus, but went on to witness to him, die for him, and help the young Christian community on its way. Whatever our vocation, let us hold fast to our confidence that God does not abandon those he calls.