

## Sermon for Sunday 31st January 2010 – ‘Vocation’ (Part I)

As many of you know, my daytime job is to teach the law, predominantly the law of England & Wales. My students are overwhelmingly at the start of their careers, fresh from high school and A Levels. At the end of their time with us, the fifty per cent of graduates who still want to become practising lawyers move on to courses which impart not so much knowledge or understanding of the law – that’s our job – as the day-to-day skills of the lawyer’s office or chambers. One of those has, until now, been called the Bar Vocational Course.

Two years ago a working group chaired by Derek Wood QC, reviewing that course for the Bar Standards Board asked itself the question ‘Is it a preparation for barristers’ pupillage and practice, or a form of wider legal education?’ and replied ‘Some members of our group strongly believe that the adjective “Vocational” is not appropriate. The Bar is a profession, not a vocation.’ Yet, oddly enough, the people who complete what will soon become instead the Bar Professional Training Course will still be *called* to the Bar by one of the Inns of Court.

With an eye partly to the wider public, and particularly to the government and the media, the Wood Report was keen, in retitling the course, to emphasise the service barristers render to their clients and the professional relationship. There is an ongoing process of ‘demystifying’ the Bar, making it seem more like other professions in the light of the current drive for equality come what may. To speak of vocation may, in the eyes of some of the working group, have made barristers sound too much like ministers of religion: too remote from ordinary jobs and the prosaic commercial world.

But is this really what vocation is? Something confined to a few very rarified careers? Something focussing purely upon the one called, and not on the task he or she is called to do, nor on those whom that task will benefit? I suggest quite strongly that the Wood Report was there drawing a false dichotomy, and that a closer look at this idea of vocation is in order.

Calling. Vocation. Something that others do to you: you cannot call yourself. Something that singles you out: a call is different from a shout or a general announcement. It is something personal, even if the call is simply ‘Come in Number Seven; your time is up’. Something to which you can respond or not, as you choose: if you’re far enough away to be called, you are probably far enough away to ignore the call and get away with it, at least for a while. And yet, for that very reason, potentially the start of a two-way commitment; because if you responds to a call you agree to do what the one calling is asking, and the caller in turn takes on a responsibility of support.

Judaeo-Christianity has long used the language of calling, both for individuals and collectively. God calls Israel to be a light to the nations. Christians are called out of darkness, says Peter, into God’s marvellous light. Noah, Abraham, Moses, Isaiah and other prophets, Andrew and other disciples, Saul of Tarsus and Timothy, all were called to specific tasks. But whereas for these famous individuals the Bible gives us an account of a call so clear that none of them could fail to recognise it for what it was, the ordinary members of Israel and followers of the Christian way may not have found their calling so obvious. Jews were brought up in their faith, males circumcised as a sign of participation in the covenant before they knew what was going on, probably realised they were part of a community some time before being told that the community was one called by God to a specific mission. A new Christian’s earliest consciousness as such may be of failing, of needing help, of things suddenly making sense, of a group to which it feels right to belong; but seldom directly of God calling. God is subtler than that – one is often called unawares. Or, as with the boy Samuel, one may hear a call but not realise from whom it comes.

Many things have in the past been called vocations. One is not only said to be called from darkness to light, but called to marriage, called to reign, and – yes – called to preach. The catechism of the Prayer Book once in common use in the parish churches of England asked

the adolescent 'What is thy duty towards thy neighbour?' and expected the answer (amongst others) 'To do my duty in that state of life unto which it shall please God to call me'. We have perhaps been too ready sometimes to attribute to God's call an unrewarding job or a demeaning status that we ourselves are very glad not to have. But the notion that our Creator has a purpose for each of us, that he somehow makes that purpose known and invites us – rather than forcing us – to accept it, is a pervasive one in Christian writing over the centuries.

I think sometimes the idea of vocation is too strongly associated with the miraculous. The burning bush, Isaiah's vision that we heard this morning, the light that strikes Saul blind. God can call discreetly too – through the way he bestows gifts and talents; through childhood experiences that may not be associated with a career at all at the time, but which stick in the mind and from which the germ of an idea later starts to grow; through formal careers advice but equally through casual remarks made to one by friends. I became a lawyer largely because one of my much-admired friends wanted to be a lawyer too. I drifted back into studying later in life because I realised it would entitle me to subsidised meals and public transport in Berlin; and once in the academic environment, it was a Professor of New Testament studies in Durham who told me I should teach. I didn't feel God perceptibly nudging me at any of these stages, but as I settled into my work I realised each time that this was the right place for me to be.

What can one say, then, to those who don't find work when they want it? Who hate their work but need the money too badly to have any choice? Who, in other parts of the world, are dragged from their families and conscripted into an army? Who work all hours looking after a growing family but are dismissed as mere 'non-earning housewives'? Who have a clear and acknowledged calling, perhaps as an artist or a writer, but for some reason or other are unable to realise it? Do we just say 'stop complaining, and do your duty in that state of life unto which it hath pleased God to call you?'

Hopefully not. Not all jobs are vocations. Equally not all vocations are jobs as the world understands them. An invalid may be called to a ministry of prayer, a relative to a ministry of caring. Yet neither is the decisive test whether one likes one's job or not. Could I return to four points I made earlier: that one cannot call oneself, 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 one calling. All these points have their basis in the character of God as we know it – the origin, the initiator, the source of good things; the maker of each one of us who cares for us individually; the God who urges and persuades much more often than he compels; and the friend who stands alongside his people in trouble.

Derek Wood's working group was right, then, in the sense that a barrister's career may not be every barrister's calling. But to say that the Bar (or any other way people spend their days) 'is not a vocation' is far too general an assertion. For many who exercise that profession it is indeed a true calling. They realise their gifts, serve others, feed their families and glorify God by what they do. They may never have felt a palpable 'call' but we who look with the eye of faith can see in their lives can see God's hand in the process that made them what they are.

So it is with tasks and offices in the believing community. Many different journeys lead us to be here today. For some it was birth into a family following one of the Christian traditions combined today in the United Reformed Church. For others it may have been a slow process of exploration among many strands of belief; for others a chance visit and a feeling of being welcome. The tasks we undertake while here – as welcomers, coffee-makers, Junior Church and crèche leaders, caretaker and organist, microphone controller and Church Secretary – may have been the result of urging by friends, a discovery of new gifts, the diversion to church life of something we do regularly elsewhere. We seldom push ourselves into roles without gaining at least some sense first that this would be welcome. We have all, also, had the possibility of saying No, but chosen to say Yes.

Vocation Sunday is often given a particular focus on the ordained fulltime ministry of Word and Sacrament. In our tradition in particular, and given the time of year with the period of Elder nomination approaching, it is right that it should focus equally on the ministry of the church's other ordained office-bearers. This is in a sense a two-part sermon, because I shall be returning to specific ministries next week and taking further what we can learn from both today's and next week's scripture readings. But for now I want to draw three concluding points from what Peter says regarding the Elder's task in the community to which he writes. It is a role to be performed not by constraint of those with whom one deals, but by consent; with enthusiasm, but not for what one can get out of it; and not by telling people what to do, by domineering, so much as by example. These are actually pretty good precepts for a vocation of any sort. Because God in Christ calls but does not compel; because he often sets our feet on a stony path, yet gives us joy in the knowledge that we are saved and loved; and because Christ walks with us through good and bad experiences, through crisis and routine, through temptation and inspiration, in company and alone.