

OUR VOCATION AND MINISTRY

A Sermon preached at the National Pilgrimage to the Shrine at Glastonbury

Readings: Ephesians 4.1-13, John 15.12-17

What a great blessing it is for us to gather in this holy place, and on this day, drawing strength from God's grace made known to us in his Son Jesus Christ, whose Spirit moves among us here and now. And it is a great privilege for me to be asked to preach here today as we consider our vocation and ministry in the life of the church within which we serve. And I know that the whole world rejoices with us today. Everywhere you look, there are tokens of people's desire for the love of God. Cars, public buildings, houses, all adorned this day with the cross of Jesus Christ, on a white background! A loyal support to our concelebrating clergy! We are richly blessed.

I first heard the word 'vocation' at the age of six, when a nun of formidable size, stature and vocal ability told everyone after Mass that I had a vocation. I had just had chicken pox, and wondered if this was some visible side effect. But my family got terribly excited about it all. And later, I explored that vocation, that thought that God might have plans for me. And I drifted in and out of that process as I discovered more and more about who I was, and what mattered to me. And I don't deny that for a time other things seemed more attractive than a life committed to God. But in the end I stopped running away from God. I gave in, gave in to the message of love and forgiveness and generous grace which God has freely bestowed on each and every one of us.

It's a fairly classic story of how one person responded, over the course of many years, to a calling from God, and you will have heard things like this before. And I have cause to wonder how those members of the congregation would have responded if Sister had said, all those years ago, 'because we all have a vocation.' As I went through the early part of my adult life I felt that my vocation was best expressed as a teacher. I realised that people used the language of vocation mainly about priesthood and the religious life, but also on occasion about teaching and nursing. I decided that having a vocation meant 'not being paid very much.'

But that wasn't true, either. What was true - and has been true for me since 16th September 1962 - is that when I was baptised on that most vital day of my life - I was given by God everything I needed to equip me to become a saint. And if that's true for me, it's true for you as well. When we were baptised, we received an abundance of gifts, more than we can count. We were made members of the family of Jesus Christ, which we call the church. We received mercy, a mercy only God can give. We were purified, forgiven, adopted by God, a co-heir with Christ, a temple of the Spirit. Because of our Baptism we can believe, and hope in God, and learn to love him: we can live the life of the Holy Spirit, God-within-us, and we can grow in goodness. All of that is possible for us, if we allow the graces of baptism to take root in our lives. And that includes the understanding that God has plans for all of us. Vocation? We've all got one. It came with our baptism. Check the memo! And the awakening of that understanding - that we are all precious to God, all loved by him, all called by him, is a wonderful, miraculous truth which, if we realised its power, would bring new life to the church!

Very often, when we speak of vocations, we are praying for more priests. That's a good thing, because we need more faithful, holy priests to serve in our parishes, to feed people with the bread of life, to speak of grace, and forgiveness. But we can't stop there. Our understanding of vocation starts with our understanding of God's call in our lives. So I have a little test for you. This test of vocation has been approved by our Bishops and thoroughly vetted by the General Synod. We're going to see whether we have been called by God to serve him in his church. I want you to select one of your hands, and place it in front of your face... Then take a deep breath, and direct stream of

air onto the palm of your hand. Now, put your hands up if you felt a stream of air against your hand. You did? Excellent...it means that you are breathing, and alive, and that God has therefore called you to serve Him in the church! That might be as a priest, or as a deacon. It may be as a reader or lay minister. It may be in any one of the many roles the local parish needs to be effective in mission. It may be as someone who visits others, who prays with people, who organises generous hospitality. There are many different gifts, St Paul tells Corinth, but it is always the same Spirit; there are many ways of serving, but it is always the same Lord. Each of us brings what we have to the table, because God gives us his Son; and together those gifts give the church what it needs to flourish, to grow.

Jesus calls us servants no longer. He calls us friends. And friends are people we trust. We trust friends to do things for us. So does Jesus. He longs for his friends to ask him what he wants them to do. And I don't care how young, or how old you are - whether you are at the beginning of your life, or in your prime - there is always the question to be asked. What do you want of me, Lord? How do you want me, your friend, to fit into your plans? What are your desires for me? And some of the most beautiful stories I could tell you have come from people who have started to ask these questions relatively late in life. There is immense, God-given potential in all of us, wherever we have come from, whatever our stories. We all come from different places, but we are all heading for the same place - our home in heaven, drawn there through the perfect love of the Father, shown to us in Jesus, driven by the Spirit, active and dynamic whenever the Mass is celebrated.

So, a question for you, and a possible way forward. The question is simple in the asking, a lifetime in the answering. 'What do you want of me, Lord? What do I have to give you, to our glory, for our good and the good of all the Holy Church? And keep asking. And when you have done that, speak to someone. Speak to a friend - ' what do you think I have that I could offer God? Pray, ask again, reflect. Speak to your parish priest. Take time, because it is the most important question you will ask. One your minds and hearts to possibilities you have not yet imagined. For you are called to be saints, and God has given you everything you need to accomplish that.

You did not choose Jesus. Jesus chose you, and appointed you to go out and bear fruit - fruit that will last. May the living God open our hearts and minds, our very beings, so that we may respond to the eternal promptings of love deep within our hearts.

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