

## Vocation

Thomas Merton, a trappist monk, describes a summer dawn in the valley where his monastery was set. When they rise for the night office at 2.15a.m., there is no sound except in the monastery. By 3.00, there are the first stirrings of the birds in the valley. He writes: "The first chirps of the waking day birds mark the *point vierge* of the dawn under a sky as yet without real light, a moment of awe and inexpressible innocence, when the Father in perfect silence opens their eyes. They begin to speak to Him, not with fluent song, but with an awakening question that is their dawn state, their state at the *point vierge*. Their condition asks if it is time for them to "be". He answers "yes". Then they one by one wake up and become birds. They manifest themselves as birds, beginning to sing. Presently they will be fully themselves, and will even fly". . . . "All wisdom" he writes, "seeks to collect and manifest itself at that blind sweet point . . . . the virgin point between darkness and light, between non-being and being." (*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* p.128)

The invitation to sing is a metaphor of God's invitation to every human being. We live in what the TV playwright, Dennis Potter, called the karaoke society, where the majority feel they have to dance to someone else's tune, to sing someone else's song. But God invites you also to sing a song for others that is your own, unique to you, where, so to speak, the words are your words and the music is your own composition.

One of my favourite vocation quotes says: "God sends each person into this world with a special message to deliver, a special song to sing for others, with a special act of love to bestow. No-one else can speak my message, or sing my song, or offer my act of love. They are only entrusted to me".

In the parable of the sower, the sower sows the word. 'The word' is not the Bible. It is not some general pronouncement of universal application. It is God's word to you, uniquely and personally, his personal invitation to you to live and to be fruitful

for others in some specific way. The traditional word for that is 'vocation'. But that word has been much misused, either referring to certain roles that certain people have, or, in more recent usage like "vocational qualifications" meaning anything. As Francis Dewar, a writer on vocation has said, "In ordinary use the word vocation has become drained of red blood, purged of passion, and emptied of God. Even in the Church it has become narrowed to mean the ordained ministry or the religious life".

How do we go about discerning what God's personal invitation to you might be? Before answering that question, there are two cautionary points to make. The first is that the search can be long, spread over decades even. Part of the reason for this is the karaoke nature of society, where the expectation is that there will be a readymade slot for you to occupy. There isn't. You make your own. Responding to God's personal calling to you isn't about filling a pre-existent slot. It will be something you do that isn't in any job spec; or if it is, what you do will be beyond what the job spec. requires.

The second caution concerns the nature of God. For it is God who calls and a person's idea of what God is like may affect and severely restrict the kinds of things they expect him to call them to do. Some people need to be careful in listening for God's invitation to them, because it won't be God they're listening to, but an inner policeman, or head-teacher, or critical parent, or ecclesiastical bigot. The true God is compassionate to all, the source of all creativity, the goal of all longing, concerned with all of life (not just churchly things), and will draw you out beyond anything you think you are remotely capable of – if you let him.

There are many ways to listen, many strands in the discernment of personal vocation. A fruitful place to start might be to reflect on the question 'What is your passion?' Have you discovered what you are passionate about? Maybe not yet; but let that question 'What is your passion?' lie around in your mind. In asking that, I'm not referring to any relationships. I'm passionate about my wife every day, but that fact may or may not help me to work out my vocation. And it's not just a question of your latest

enthusiasm. Enthusiasms come and go. But if you are genuinely passionate about something it will connect with your depths. Your passion may not be related to God's call to you; but his call will in some way be related to something you are passionate about.

Opening yourself to the calling of God means being open to the possibility that something that you are passionate about could perhaps be a gift in some way to others.

In the parable of the sower Jesus listed some of the things that will pull you aside – the cares of the world, the lure of wealth, the desire of other things (like status, or security, or popularity). The parable of the sower was taken from Jesus' own experience. In his temptations in the desert, he felt the power of the things that would pull him aside, divert him from his bliss, block his response to God's call. That time in the desert was the necessary prelude to his wholehearted and passionate giving of himself in the story-telling, teaching and healing of the first years of his ministry.

Jesus' mother and brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd. And he was told 'Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you'. But he said to them, 'My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it' ". (Luke 8, 19-21)

Today, in the Gospel reading we hear the words "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them and they follow me. (Hearing and doing

You don't have to go far at the moment to see plenty of young sheep. Guess how many shepherds I have seen this year? None.

But you will see lots of fields or enclosures made up of hedges and fences. In Australia they apparently don't make much use of either shepherds or hedges. If you are wondering how they get the sheep to go to, and remain, where they should be, they rely

on wells, or springs – rather like those still waters that we are told about in Psalm 23.

It seems then that there are three ways in which you can control sheep: restrain them with the fenced-in field, or you can have the shepherd, or the well or spring. Another possibility is, of course, the sheep dog, but they work in conjunction with shepherds, so I see them as a tool of the shepherd, rather than a method in their own right. I want us to just stay with these 3 images, of enclosures, shepherds and wells, as we think about vocation. Our culture can often influence the way we view Scripture so it would be worth bearing in mind that within our culture we are a little more familiar with fences and enclosures, rather than shepherds and wells.

Of course, a question that is raised when using the word vocation is, what actually is a vocation? If we had time, you could consult and find that there are different ideas.

But all Christians, have a vocation to be part of the ministry of the Body of Christ in the local situation. That might be through our role as friends or neighbours within a locality, it might be through responsibilities that we take on at church, or it might be how we live out our faith within our work place. At work, locally or nationally, it might mean allowing our faith to challenge the assumptions and practices of the world.

A problem with enclosing vocation, and putting different ministries into their different fields, is that we can easily see some fields as being at the top of the hill and having greener grass, or at least more status, than other fields.

I find the images of fields, shepherds and wells helpful in understanding how people begin to sense a vocation. God creates people with different personalities so different people will perceive God communicating with them in different ways. For some it will be the voice within, a sense of listening out for, and trying to recognise the voice of the shepherd. Sometimes we may be heading off in the wrong direction and will be conscious

that the shepherd has sent his sheepdogs to worry us, and encourage us to change direction. For others it will be the outside stimulus that speaks to them, they are drawn to the well or spring. An awareness of a need does not constitute a call, but if you are not aware that it is there, you cannot even begin the journey.

If we acknowledge fields or enclosures, perhaps we find a security in staying within one field but we might find it hard to realise that the shepherd could be calling us, or leading us to move to another field.

So far the imagery has been very much focussed on individual sheep. Sheep, being led by shepherds, are, almost by definition, Anglican but if you have observed the dynamics of a flock of sheep you will know that they are also good Congregationalists. Some sheep will help other sheep know how to hear the voice of the shepherd, some will help others know how best to feed and or will direct others to the still waters. Vocation is the same. It does not come just to an individual in isolation but there is the need for the others in the congregation to be praying, challenging, encouraging, nurturing, affirming and supporting. We all have our role in seeking to find what it is that God wants of us and also helping and supporting others as they seek to explore God's leading for their lives.

St Irenaeus wrote that 'the glory of God is a human being fully alive'. Through the dual process of becoming more fully ourselves and of becoming more fully Christ-like, the will of God is fulfilled and the glory of God seen. That is what Vocations Sunday is about. You have one life. For God's sake and for your own, live it.

### **You Can't Mean Me!**

(A reading or meditation/conversation with God for one person)

You can't mean me, God?

Can you?

I'm not anybody special,  
or particularly different?

You can't mean me.

Chosen last for every team!

Left at the back of the queue,

A wallflower in the dance of life,

Edged out by brighter blooms.

You can't mean me!

So Moses grumbled – 'I cannot speak'

You can't mean me!

So Gideon exclaimed – 'I'm the youngest son of the least of the tribes'

You can't mean me!

So Isaiah lamented – 'Unclean lips'

You can't mean me!

So Jeremiah explained – 'only a youth'

You can't mean me!

So Mary said – 'how can this be?'

You can't mean me!

But you do, don't you?

You do mean me.

All my gifts and graces,

Outweighed at times with all my faults and failings.

You want them all,

To be woven together

And shaped for your use.

You do mean me.

You mean us –

Like bread to be taken, blessed and broken,

To be named, 'this is my body',

And given to a hungry world.