

After the events of Monday night in Manchester, and the ongoing atrocities that are happening regularly all around the world, I wondered whether I should change the topic of my talk for tonight. I ultimately decided no, and not just because Gareth had told the Minster congregation last week what I would be preaching on! I don't know whether it's because the older I get, the more in tune I seem to be of the hardships and fear that seems to afflict so many people around the world, or it's because the world is indeed a scary, dark, place at times. It may be to do with being a dad, who knows.

So after thinking about it, I realised that actually, no, we *do* need to think about our place in God's plan for all of this hardship and fear. How we are called to bring light to the dark places. How we are called to take a part in the mission to bring God's kingdom here on earth.

Bible readings: 1 Samuel 3.1-10
 Jeremiah 1.4-9
 Ephesians 4.1-8, 11-13

After Gareth preached about proclamation last month, I spent some time thinking about the natural follow on from that.

I was somewhat overawed with Gareth's instruction to me of: "preach on whatever you want!"

This much freedom scared me!

After conversations with Sarah about it at home, it suddenly seemed obvious that the natural progression of thinking about us all proclaiming the Gospel of Christ to all we see, in all the world, is the specifics of that calling.

Calling and vocation mean a lot to me, I have spent A LOT of time over the last ten years or so trying to discern what my role is in this world, to work out what God is calling me to do, and as I'm sure you'll all know, it's been a rocky, challenging, and at times disappointing journey.

I hope my experiences coupled with my interpretation of some key passages in the Bible will help us all here tonight to think about our own vocations.

So, what is our vocation in this world.

What is God calling each of us individually to do?

Just so we're all on the same page, I looked up vocation in the dictionary.

According to my Evangelical Dictionary of Theology:

"Derived from the Latin *voco*, "I call", the word is used to describe God's calling to his people both individually and corporately."

So there we are, it says right there that we are called by God as individuals and as a Church, community, society.

But let's not just take the word of the dictionary on it, I'd like to look at some of the ways that God called people throughout the Bible and see how they may reflect on our experiences and context.

The first reading is from 1 Samuel, and tells of the calling of Samuel as a boy.

Samuel was born in extraordinary circumstances, the answer to prayer from a mother unable to conceive, and given to the Lord to serve Him in the temple.

This story telling of Samuel hearing God's voice makes a point that hearing God communicate with humanity was rare in those days, hence Samuel's confusion at what is going on.

Three times Samuel goes to Eli when he hears his name called.

It's only after the third time that Samuel disturbs him that the wise, experienced Eli understands what is going on, and is able to tell Samuel what to do.

Even though Samuel doesn't understand that it's God calling him, God perseveres.

Samuel thinks he is responding to the call, he's just doing it wrong! God keeps on nudging until Samuel catches up, thanks to the advice of Eli.

I know in my life I have not always heard the call clearly.

Or felt called in a direction that turns out to be wrong.

In the long run, it didn't matter though.

God can be *relentless*!

Who'd have thought that the perseverance and patience of the creator of the universe would overcome my ignorance, stubbornness, fear?!

Time after again I've barked up the wrong tree, and patiently God has waited for me to catch up, for that "oooooh yeah" moment of clarity and understanding.

Sometimes it takes longer than others, sometimes it's a really obvious event, or conversation, or specific moment we can look at in the moment that we can see is God working in our lives.

Sometimes it isn't until much later that we can see events have been leading us down a path towards our calling.

No matter how long it takes us, God is waiting.

When we finally hear God's call for what it is and respond, faithfully, humbly, God will use us as He sees fit for his plan.

Jeremiah's calling is similarly direct.

God gives him a clear understanding of how intimately He knows Jeremiah, how he had called him to his task and vocation before he was even born, even conceived.

Regardless, Jeremiah claims that he is not ready for God's task, he is too young, and he doesn't have the required skills.

Yeah, you and me both fella!

How often do you feel that you can't possibly be called to do a certain task or calling because you aren't worthy, skilled enough, wise enough.

This seems to be the battle I fight with myself most days!

God replies with “don’t put yourself down, you’ve got this, because I’m with you, always.”

God doubles down on this promise by putting out His hand, touching Jeremiah’s mouth, and putting the words that he would need there.

I don’t think God calls us to a vocation that we are entirely unequipped to do.

That doesn’t mean it’ll be easy!

But even though we may be called to do hard things, to speak with people who might not want to hear what we have to say, to make ourselves vulnerable, to make sacrifices, God is with us through all of it.

He knows what we need:

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you”,

and He has constantly got our backs now:

“for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.”

The promise that God will provide us with what we need to carry out our vocation is hard and scary.

It involves trust.

That trust that God would deliver is where the disciples are at this moment in the Church year, where we have a slight pause between Ascension and Pentecost.

They continue to pray and trust that they will have what they need to carry out their task provided by God, and low and behold, the Holy Spirit turns up!

When we trust in God, we see we have all received this gift of guidance, skill, ability, gifts to be able to carry out our vocation.

In the New Testament there are more tales of people being called in extraordinary ways:

- Mary being called to be the mother of Jesus;
- the fishermen called to follow Jesus;
- and a key one for me: Jesus calling Peter back to him after He has risen.

Peter had denied knowing Jesus three times, and three times Jesus asks Peter whether he loves him, and when he answers yes, asks Peter to lead his flock.

If you don’t hear that calling or vocation, or try to run away from it, you may feel embarrassed or reluctant when you suddenly realise what you’re called to do to carry it out.

You may feel you’ve strayed too far, ignored God for too long, put it off too much.

This interaction between Jesus and Peter shows that luckily this isn’t the case.

God is always waiting for us to realise what the deal is with our callings, to equip us, and to send us out into the world to proclaim his word and do his works.

At the start, I mentioned how vocation has an individual and a corporate aspect.

This morning at Woodmansey I preached about how the key to getting through the tough times that we face is community and prayer.

We all have an individual calling, but this calling will fit into a corporate setting, somewhere, somehow.

The passage from Ephesians reminds us that we all have a role in the body of Christ, we all have a calling, we all have a task.

Some are called to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and some teachers.

And all of this is so that the body of Christ can be built up, so that everyone will hear the Good News of the Gospel, and be able to respond to it, to join in their place in the body of Christ.

God calls all kinds of people for this work, including all of us.

So, as some form of conclusion:

We all have a vocation.

All of us are called to take part in that work to build the Kingdom of God here on earth as part of the body of Christ.

It may not be easy to hear what our calling is, sometimes we mishear, misunderstand, mistake it for something else.

Regardless, God will keep on calling us.

Sometimes we don't feel worthy, or skilled, or equipped to fulfil the vocation God has called us to.

God has our back, He has sent His Holy Spirit to equip us, and will be with us through all hardships.

Sometimes we wilfully turn the other way and deny knowing what we're supposed to do.

The door is always open, Jesus is always calling us back, all we need to do is be honest, say sorry, and crack on with doing what we are supposed to.

And sometimes we might think that vocation means a calling to priesthood only, so couldn't possibly refer to me plugging away in my life.

Nope, Paul lays it out clear in his letter to the Ephesians: we've all been called, all been given a gift, and all have a role to play in the mission of proclaiming the Good News.

My prayer for all of us tonight is that we don't have a fuzzy idea about our vocation, that instead the way ahead for us all can be clear, that we have the courage to follow the path given to us, and the confidence that God has equipped us for the work ahead.

Amen.