

## Second Sunday after Epiphany, January 15 2012. Called to be faithful.

Some time ago, when shopping, I bought books (as I do ☺) and received them in a bag emblazoned with a wonderful message. "I am thick, but I am useful, as I am re-usable." I wondered at the time whether I could have that printed on a T-shirt, since a lot of the time I think it applies not just to the bag but to me as well.

Usefulness is a virtue, though in Christian terms it seems to me that usefulness is closely connected with faithfulness and both come from how we respond to the call of God.

The readings this morning are all about being called - Samuel was called (1 Samuel 3:1-10), and so (of course, some would say) he went into service of God and religious leadership. Philip was called (John 1:43-51) and so ended up as a disciple and part of the religious leadership established by Jesus.

When we hear that someone has had a call from God I suspect that we still think of it in narrow ways. When we speak about people being called into ministry, one of the phrases which often seems to go with that is that a person is going 'into the church' - that is, they will end up being ordained and involved in religious leadership.

Actually, most often, the call to ministry is a call to get out of the church - at least, a call to get out of the church building and to get beyond the boundaries of what is easily defined as a church community. The invitation of God into deeper relationship and into deeper connection is most often an invitation to move outwards rather than inwards in terms of the church as organisation. It does not mean - go away, go free, get out of here, you are on your own now! In fact, quite the opposite. The call to ministry should bind us even more closely to the community in which we are fed, in which we gather to celebrate the sacraments (in which heaven and earth meet and God is revealed to us), to hear the Word, to share community with those who share with us the relationship with our amazing God.

But if, when we feel called by God, when we feel God stirring in our lives, when we may even wake in the middle of the night with an insistent voice which will not go away, then our first impulse is to look for more jobs within the church to do then I think we need to think again. I am not saying that the tasks which sustain us as community are not important. Of course not! The things which so many people do to prepare for worship and to offer care and to keep the organisation and presence of the church in this place functioning are vital and valuable. Yet there is so much more.

Look at Philip and his response to Jesus. Jesus sought him out. There is a deliberate sense in those opening words of the passage as we read it today (John 1:43). Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He didn't just happen to be there. He wasn't just passing through. He went deliberately. And he found Philip. The clear sense of this, especially because the story then focuses on Philip and not on something else that Jesus did next, is that Jesus went there to find Philip.

Have you yet been sought in such a deliberate way? The sort of call, like Samuel's call in the middle of the night, in which you come to recognise that God hasn't just cast a wide net and you happened to get caught up, or fired a shotgun invitation and you just happened to get hit, but God has shot an arrow and you are the target? Do you know that God loves and invites YOU, that God is interested in YOU, that God undertakes specific, deliberate, focussed, targeted actions to get YOUR attention??

Philip realised what Jesus was doing - and what did he do? He followed by walking away from Jesus. Philip heard the call of Jesus and walked away. Philip walked away BECAUSE he was following Jesus - and he walked away to respond deliberately. What did Philip do? He went and found Nathaniel. Again - this was not just a random 'here I am walking along, oh, hey, Nathaniel, what are you doing here under this tree?' Philip acted as deliberately as Jesus had acted. He went to share the invitation. Philip stirred Nathaniel's interest and when Nathaniel responded, albeit somewhat cynically at first, Philip said "Come and see."

Philip's response to Jesus' attention was to go and find someone else to tell them what was happening in him and to him. In John's Gospel - and notice we are only up to verse 43 of the first chapter - Philip wasn't the first evangelist ... but the third! John the Baptist first saw Jesus for who he truly is and told other people about Jesus (John 1:29). Andrew was invited by Jesus to come closer and find out what He had to say. And Andrew's response? He went and told his brother, Simon-Peter, about Jesus (John 1:41). There is a pattern here. The invitation into connection with Jesus - the calling from God - is something to share, not something to keep to ourselves. It is something to share with family, friends, with those who are around us in our lives. How? By being who we are.

Among the books on my shelves are some biographies, including three about characters I want to mention. Richard Hooker – a sixteenth century Anglican theologian whose writings are still very influential today; William Tyndale – from earlier in the sixteenth century, whose translations of the Bible from Greek and Hebrew into English shaped the majority of the King James Version and whose phrases and use of words still echo in our modern translations; and Michael Kirby – an influential and widely respected lawyer who, until his retirement almost 11 years ago, served as an Australian High Court Judge.

All three of these men had calls by God. Yes, Hooker and Tyndale were clergy but that was only part of their calling. Tyndale's call was to use the gift with languages which he had and the passion he felt for common people to understand the Bible. Tyndale wrote (so he said) so that the 'ploughboy in the field' would be able to hear and receive the Word of God. Hooker spent a lot of his life teaching – in Oxford and in other places. In the last decade of his life he realised that his best response to the troublesome arguments of those who were trying to destroy both the Church and English society as he knew it, was to write. His *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* are sublime explanations of church and law and society and the presence of God in the world around us. Hooker's words on the place of law influenced even Michael Kirby across 400 years, but before I come to the third biography a couple of words from Hooker.

Hooker wrote beautifully about prayer – not just the sort of carefully crafted common prayers which we find in printed books, but also the sort which are more common to us all. He wrote: "Every good and holy desire, though it lack the form, has, notwithstanding, in itself the substance, ..., the voice of prayer." God, who 'regards' our "moanings, groans, and sighs", hears what we pray even when it is anything but a neat and polished prayer. About music, Hooker wrote: "Our very soul responds to music, finding there the harmony which defines its nature, ... Music touches the divine within us." I find that encouraging. Hooker used his talents to touch the lives of others, to call them – and us – to deeper living, inviting connection with God.

Michael Kirby has been a controversial figure, but his call from God was as real. He did think, early in his life, that he might have been called to ordained ministry, but then felt the call to the practise of law. Throughout his life his faith and the values and principles which his faith in God taught him resonated in the positions which he took, the causes which he battled for, what he said and wrote and how he was involved in the pursuit of justice. And even in retirement that passionate grounding of his life in his faith continues still.

Tyndale, Hooker and Kirby, and Samuel, and John and Peter and Philip, and so many, many others, remind me that the call of God is a call to be faithful wherever we are.

It is a call to be a faithful teacher; to be a faithful mechanic; to be a faithful student; to be a faithful wife; to be a faithful husband; to be a faithful engineer; to be a faithful neighbour ...

What does this faithfulness look like? That we are faith full – that our faith and our relationship with God is recognisable in us. In the same way we say someone who is joyful is bubbling with joy, and the same way that we say someone who is thoughtful is so deeply considering something it is as if we can hear the cogs grinding, and the same way we say that someone who is hopeful has a positive attitude which can sweep others up into grasping a vision of something not yet completely visible – this is what it means to be faithful. In fact joy, deep thought and hope are all aspects of faith. Perhaps we should term new words – to be Godful, Christful, Gospelful, Churchful ...? And all of those to be lived in ways in which what is within us, part of us, so deeply embedded that it IS us ... shines.

The passage which we read this morning from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians touches on this. In a reminder which rings down to our over consuming modern society Paul reminds us that godliness is not so much about what we eat but how we eat – how we pay attention to the gift of life which has been given to us and the impact on others of the decisions we make about how we use the opportunities of life and human interaction. Our lives, our pattern of living, will speak to others of God, or not. And we have a choice in that.

As I think about my plastic bag, and the possibility of a T-shirt with the same slogan I know that I don't always hear or heed the call of God – there is an element of being 'thick' about me, but I do know that when I do listen, when I am faithful, I am useful to God, and that the blessings which flow from letting God be seen in my life are not just a once off episode or something of the past, or something with a time limit whatever my age, but the opportunity and the invitation from God will continue to be present in my life, and yours, over and over and over .. and over again. And then I am not just being useful, but faith-full.

Amen. **Paul Mitchell**