



VOCATION: A REFLECTION

(Prepared by Revd Dr Richard Goldring, Southern Synod Director of Education and Learning, for a workshop at a Vocations Fair)

Suggested scriptures to refer to: Psalm 139: Ephesians .4:4-7,11-13

Let me ask you a question:

What do you mean by the word “vocation”? Is it a *helpful* word?

Francis Dewar (*Called or Collared?*) suggests that, in church life, the word “vocation” is used in several different senses and argues that it is helpful to differentiate them.

(a) vocation simply means “**calling**”. **Our God**, the God of Jesus Christ, the God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is a God who speaks “in many and various ways”: and he **calls**. He called his people Israel into being. He calls the community of believers known as the church into being. Jesus calls the first disciples and calls us today individually to “follow me”. So we as *Christians* are a people who are called and individuals who are called. To be a *Christian* is to be someone who is called – OK we may have *experienced* the call in different ways but that’s immaterial. **The important point is that the concept of vocation is relevant for every Christian, not just an elite few!**

(b) we as the body of Christ or as individual Christians have a **vocation or calling *simply as Christians***. We are called to be disciples and many of the most important things we are called to do, we are called to do *simply because we are Christians*.¹ [So just because someone is diligent about sharing his faith with others it doesn’t automatically

¹ London: SPCK, 2nd edition 2000

¹ To explore this theme further, see David Cornick, *Letting God be God: The Reformed Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd 2008)

¹ An Ordination Charge from the Methodist Church in Singapore graphically illustrates the point by beginning “We are not ordaining you to ministry; that happened at your baptism” and continues in the same vein. It can be found in Michael Counsell (ed.), *More Prayers for Sundays* (London: Harper Collings 1997, item 43g.

follow that he is called to give up his job as a computer salesman and become a full-time evangelist: for all Christians are called to share their faith.]

(c) as an **individual** Christian each of us will have a particular calling or vocation. The Psalmist speaks of the uniqueness of our individual creation (Ps.139) and Paul of the gifts of which every Christian will have some. God has shown us something important through the way that he has created us and gifted us. So our **individual vocation** may be to

- particular role within the body of Christ, or
- some other kind of task we have a God-given passion about. [My late mother was a keen environmentalist (before that word became fashionable) and ran a tree-planting group. Since her role combined her God-given concern for the environment, and future of the planet, her gift of administration and her love of gardening, I think it would be correct to apply the word “vocation” to that task.]
- the secular work we do in the home or to earn our living
 - some *learned and caring* professions have tended to be referred to as “vocations”;
 - however, this usage is too narrow. [My one-time *plumber* once described to me the satisfaction that he got through doing his job and doing it well – had he applied the word “vocation” to it, it would have seemed entirely appropriate.]
 - And remember that our Reforming forbears were absolutely clear that the *world* was a place where God could be served as effectively as in religious life. That there was nothing better about being a monk or priest than about being a farmer – it all depended on what God wanted for your life in particular.

(d) then Dewar refers to the way that some Christians speak about **being a minister or vicar as being a “vocation”**. Dewar doubts whether this is appropriate. He points about something very obvious: that being a minister or vicar in a particular place entails **doing a job**. And that the job varies from place to place and may not correspond with one’s exact sense of vocation.

- This makes a lot of sense applied to myself.
 - When I was minister of Streatham URC, *some* of what I did tallied very closely with my sense of calling based on Ephesians 4:10-12 (“It was Christ who gave some to be.... pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the whole body of Christ may be built

up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature..."). But other things I needed to do to enable necessary work to get done.

- And that sense of calling based on my Ephesian 4:10-12 explains why I do my current job of Synod Development Officer for Education and Learning. Again, *to some extent*, and those words are important, it fulfils my own sense of vocation.
- So I have one vocation but within the URC I have had two different jobs! Do I feel **called to be a URC minister**? Not precisely, though some of the jobs a URC minister might do fit my sense of vocation well.
- So I find it helpful to differentiate between **personal sense of vocation** and a **particular job**.
 - There isn't going to be an exact fit between the two but the more compatible they are, the better.
 - Now this very important in practice and where real discernment is called for.
 - Because, you may love visiting the sick and housebound and do them a great deal of good. But you would need to think long and hard about whether that would be a sufficient basis to candidate for ordained ministry. Why? Because the job of being minister in a particular place invariably involves a lot of other tasks too. You are going to need to be able to preach, lead worship, give leadership to the congregation, etc.
 - So if you are thinking of offering yourself as a candidate for some form of ministry, ask yourself what are the core tasks of people in that form of ministry. Which aspects motivate you? Do you have any aptitude for them? Are you in a position to tell whether you might have any aptitude for them?
 - At the time I first experienced my sense of call to full-time Christian ministry, I had never preached, so it became important that I did so – if you feel a sense of leaning towards a ministry that might entail preaching and haven't done it before, it's time to try.

So much for what vocation is, or might be. But how do we discern one?

Let me ask your response to this. An elder of a church in vacancy, where because of the ministerial vacancy she had undertaken the unfamiliar task of leading worship and preaching, told me that, after leading services, several church members had asked her whether she was going to pursue that particular form of ministry, perhaps by training to be a lay preacher. Some had asked her whether she felt called to do it.

She said to me “I can’t say I’ve heard a voice from heaven [sc. telling me to do it] but I do know that I get a great deal out of the study and preparation necessary to do it”.

Because the conversation had already been long, I didn’t probe further. But, supposing she said that to you, and asked for your response and advice, what would you say? And which part of her comment would you think more significant – the first bit that said “I can’t say I’ve heard a voice from heaven [sc. telling me to do it]” or second bit that said “I do know that I get a great deal out of the study and preparation necessary to do it”?

The first bit is about a supernatural sense of “feeling guided” but the second is about motivation, priorities, gifts, etc.

In my own sense of calling to ordained ministry, both elements were present – I had the distinct sense during a particular period of time that God was calling me to some kind of teaching/pastoral role within the church and, during that period, Ephesians 4:10-12, seemed to be speaking very personally to me about the priorities for my future life: And during the next couple of years I came to realize that the things I did in church life and wasn’t paid for motivated me more than the things I was paid for and that I had some significant aptitude for those things - things to do with teaching the faith, providing insight and giving leadership, and engaging with others (it was the “pastoral” bit of “pastors and teachers” that took longest for me to take on board).

Which of those aspects seems more important to you? And by what other means might you discern a call?

Despite having had the experience myself and it having been very significant, I do **not** think the “supernatural” experience, the “word from the Lord”, is essential. What *is*

essential is the **conviction** (however it comes about) that this is something that God wants us to do, **the sense that we have to do it** even if at times it scares us out of our wits or don't want to do it at all. Think of the way Paul wrote about his vocation to preach (1 Corinthians 9:16 "I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!")

This conviction often comes about through what other people see in us or promptings from other people. If one mature Christian says to you "have you thought about xxx?" it may be just something to ponder. But if several, quite independently, ask the same thing, then you have something serious to think about. The advice given by fellow Christians is sometimes referred to as the "counsel of the saints" and, at its best, an assessment process for a form of ministry should be formalized process of giving that counsel.

The Bible does of course contain a number of "calling" stories – where do they take us?

They are largely stories about the calling of prophets or people with a prophetic role (Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah) – but these are people on the edge of organized religion rather than those carrying it out. And usually the Lord seems to tell the person called what a hard time they're going to have by serving him. I had the calling of Isaiah 6 read at my own ordination service as it did seem to resonate with my own experience. However, I would be wrong to take it as a paradigm of what ought to happen. In other words, just because it was this way for me, it doesn't follow that it should happen that way for you.

How has God made us? He made each of us unique (Ps.139) – so a natural inclination for something may be part of God's guidance because he uniquely created us.

The same is true of our spiritual gifts.

There are some kinds of Christians who think "I want to do this, so it must be wrong!" It's good to examine our motives and be realistic about our abilities – and, if we enjoy or feel an aptitude for things, that may be a sign that God wants us to use them.

How useful are the Biblical stories of the calling of prophets?

How were people selected for tasks in the early church?

How do we work out how we should be serving God today?