

ARE YOU CALLED?

Isaiah 49: 1-7; 1 Corinthians 1: 1-9; John 1: 29-42

Do you feel called in your life, called to something important, something that really matters? Do you have a purpose, a purpose that is bigger than just you, a purpose that involves the people and the world beyond you?

Well, I guess that depends what we mean by such words as call and purpose no? What does it mean to be called? What does it mean to have a purpose? Well, it may not be all that obvious for many of us. Nelson Mandela, now he had a purpose. Martin Luther king Jr, Mother Teresa, Malala Yousafzai, Greta Thunberg, a doctor working in a refugee camp, a lawyer working for human rights, a person caring for a loved one who is ill and totally dependent, a parent raising their child with special needs... in such cases, and there are many more, purpose and calling are altogether obvious.

But my concern is bigger than this. My concern is experiencing a sense of call and a purpose even in those parts of our lives where there is no clear sense of purpose, fulfillment or peace. How can a person who is a parent find their call and purpose in other parts of life beyond just being a parent, the caregiver in ways beyond just being a caregiver, the student beyond their immediate studies and their goal, an artist in those parts of life outside the ecstasy of the art?

What if our sense of call and purpose were about our whole personhood, our deepest heart and soul, our fullest potential, those parts visible but also those parts invisible and yet to unfold? How will we find our call and purpose in those circumstances we cannot control, those situations that leave us conflicted or ambivalent, those parts of life we are looking for greater fulfillment, resolution and direction? What about those parts of life where we get caught up in jealousy, petty criticism, apathy, stress, obsessiveness, resentment or negativity? Can I find the call of God in the midst of all that, some purpose through all that?

OK. Let's look at our scripture readings for some guidance and inspiration.

All three readings are about the call of God. But each of the readings speaks about call in a different way. Let's start with Isaiah. He says this: 'The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me.' Wow! Now that's a call. Do you have that kind of clarity of call? Do you feel deep in your heart that you were called by God even in your mother's womb? Well now, it's one thing for Isaiah given what he is doing as a prophet. He can look back

on his life all the way into childhood and before that and stitch it all together as one long thread of clear, awesome purpose.

But Isaiah didn't come to such conviction straightforwardly. Listen to his personal reflections in response to his call: "But I said, 'I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity.'" Have you ever felt like you've wasted a part of your life? Have you ever felt that you have missed an opportunity, failed to make good on a promise or resolution, failed to succeed in developing a talent or gift, failed morally in doing the right thing, failed in a relationship with someone else or a responsibility for someone else? I have no doubt that any one of us here can answer yes to at least one if not more of these questions. But you know, Isaiah felt that way too. He felt like a failure as a prophet with Israel. He felt ignored, scorned and rejected. He felt like he hadn't done some things well or right, that he had wasted some opportunities and neglected some possibilities.

And yet, this passage is about his call renewed. God is calling him again to go at it again, to try again to prophesy to Israel. Isaiah, like Israel, had experienced repeated failure, disappointment, defeat, and great loss too. They could beat themselves up in judgement or wallow in despair. But God who is a faithful and steadfast love, is calling them, and it is never too late so long as they are still alive and breathing. God has called them and their value is infinite in God's eyes. As long as they're still alive they can start again.

And this is just as true for you and me. The first point about the call of God is that it is about you and me just as it is about Isaiah or Israel. The fact that we have been conceived, born into this world, alive at this very moment outstrips everything we have done or failed to do, everything we've achieved or failed to achieve. So long as we are alive, God's call is still extended to us. To be a Christian who worships God is to be open to renew our sense of call again and again; our sense of call right here and now; our call in the very circumstances of our lives, with all the limitations and possibilities that are our lives, what we know and what we cannot know about ourselves, about today or tomorrow; our call in all that binds us in the relationships of our lives, what we can change, possibly, and what we cannot change, perhaps; in the midst of struggling over all that and trying to figure it all out... God's call is to us in and through all that. What difference does it make if we internalize this idea of God's call to us in all we live? What difference does it make if we got a renewed sense of call in our lives right now?

Well, this brings us to our second point, namely, what the call of God is about and how we access it more specifically. In our reading from 1 Corinthians, the apostle says this: "To the church of God that is in Corinth... called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus

Christ...God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord..." Paul's point here about call is that it is about fellowship and communion, a common bond, something we share with others in community. As Christians, we are not called to do our spirituality alone. We are called to do it in community and with others in community. The body of Christ is not just me but me with you all and together in communion, together right here and now, together also with all those past and present in the communion of saints.

But why in community? Because spirituality is first and foremost about relationships. It's about love. And love is an abstract concept unless it is lived in relationship to others, others we wouldn't necessarily choose as friends or family. Community is about the discipline of making space for others, listening to others, trying to find creative ways to be patient and forbearing, but also speaking truthfully in love. It is also about listening to the point of view of others in love, a point of view that we may not necessarily agree with. It is about disclosing ourselves to others, being vulnerable, entrusting ourselves and receiving grace, understanding and compassionate, non-judgemental listening in return.

Unless we learn something of this way of love, we cannot know what it means to be called by God. The call of God is a call to love, and the call to love is practiced in community with others, not alone. Love is what will fulfill us, shape us, develop our gifts and talents, forgive us our failures and missed opportunities, make space for us as we try to go at it again, give us a sense of peace when we are facing the limitations of life and the end of life... Love is the heart of it as the apostle tells the Corinthians later in the very same letter: "If I speak in the tongues of mortals or of angels and do not have love, I am nothing"...

So then, through Isaiah we learn that the call of God is for each and every one of us from the very moment we take our first breaths in our mother's womb. The call of God is also something that must be renewed at every moment of our lives, as new circumstances, situations and relationships come into our lives.

But second, the call of God is about love and love is forged most tangibly, practically and concretely in community with others, not alone. As we learn the discipline of loving, we discover what it means to be fuller human beings made in God's image: to love as we are loved, to forgive as we are forgiven, to repent ourselves as we forgive others who repent toward us, to make space for people even when they don't always make space for us... The call of God is about love.

But finally, the call of God is about our own spiritual path too, our own distinctive path. In our gospel reading, John the Baptist points to Jesus as the one who has a path different than his own, and Jesus then begins his ministry by calling individuals, specific individuals with their own personalities and characters, formed and in the process of being formed. You see, we are all different as

persons. We have different personalities, styles, backgrounds, capacities developed and yet to be developed. We each have our own histories, our own stories of gratitude and grace, woundedness and brokenness, our own sense of possibility and inadequacy, achievement yet to be acknowledged, and limitation yet to be faced. How is all that, all that is distinctive about us, being taken up in our relationship with God as part of our call?

How are our past wounds now part of the character that is formed in us? How are our losses part of the quality of compassion that grows in us that also becomes our call from God? How do these shape the ways we will minister to others and find new fulfillment in our lives? How do our experiences serve others rather than become an endless source of negativity and fear? How do our successes, but even and perhaps more importantly, our failures serve others in the persons we become in all our confidence and humility? Everything in our lives, not just the obvious achievements and talents, need to become the ingredients that make us who we are called before God. What is unique to us is important - the good, the bad and everything in-between. If we face all of that as integral to the call of God for us, what a rich personhood we bring into Christian community and what a rich contribution we make to the world.

We may not see it. We may feel we've got little to give or nothing left to give. But if our picture of God is defined by Jesus' approach in choosing disciples, we have to see things differently. They didn't all work out in the same way. We hear about some and not others. Some like Peter were out there, in their blunders, their fears, and their courageous witness. Others served in their quiet, invisible ways. Others struggled with their self-doubts and feelings of inadequacy even as Jesus continued to try to feed them spiritually with God's infinite love for them.

That's you and me too. We are not only called this very moment of our lives; we are not only called to love within community; we are also called to see every part of our lives - what we've been through, what we are facing now, and what our future days will bring - we are called to offer all that into our prayerful, lived relationship with God so that it becomes incorporated into our call.

Are you called? Yes, you are... Do you feel called? Will you open your heart to be renewed in your call? Will you re-consider all aspects of your life as part of your call, even the difficult parts? God needs human partners in God's mission in the world. Will you be God's partner? Amen.