VOCATION SUNDAY

Today’s readings are full of Good Shepherd imagery – comfortable, caring pastoral pictures of shepherd and flock underpinned by a love which is the love of God himself. Inevitably living as we do predominantly in complex and developed urban societies, we wonder about the relevance of that imagery.

But I have found that questions of vocation and ministry have loomed ever larger in my mind.

Here are a couple of statements – in no particular order.

The Scottish Episcopal Church has more people in training for ministry at this moment than any of us can remember – and those ordinands, who are diverse in almost every way, are getting younger. We now have candidates in training who are under 30.

A sense of calling or vocation is a life-consuming thing for those who experience it. We must be deeply aware of the feelings of those who feel called but are not chosen.

Vocation is not just about clergy. It is about Lay Readers, about all kinds of ways in which the people of the church feel called to serve and to minister

And finally – congregations have a vocation too. And part of this period when you are in the process of choosing a new Rector for St Peters is about vocational discernment. As a bishop – after many many appointment processes – I used to say gnomically to Vestries that the moment at which we choose a new Rector is the moment at which the vocation of the priest and the vocation of the congregation are aligned. I’m not altogether sure what that means in practice. But I believe it to be true. It’s not just choosing the person whom we discern to be ‘the best’. It’s trying to answer the question, ‘Why this priest for this congregation at this time?’

And congregations do have a vocation. After all, 29 of us met in two groups to look at the future of St Peter’s. We didn’t of course arrive at a clearly defined and timetabled plan. But we were able to sketch the outline of possible ways forward – identify challenges and opportunities – thinking which the Vestry and congregation can explore together with your new Rector you move forward. And those who may be considering whether they are now being called to ministry here will see that thinking as a sign of a congregation which is learning to think vocationally about its future mission and ministry

Unusually for today, I come from a long line of clergy. Old enough to remember my father’s father going out to visit his small number of parishioners in Co Cork – driven by my grandmother in the black Ford Prefect. And to remember my mother’s father in South Dublin visiting, preaching, teaching, arguing with his parishioners – playing golf with his clergy friends on Mondays. He had a pastoral, robust and traditional ministry.

Vocation caught me in my 20’s – determined not to follow the family tradition. But I suspect that what tipped the balance for me was the onset of the NI Troubles in 1969. We were living in Belfast and that experience stirred in me a calling to test the ministry of reconciliation.

So ministry for me has stretched from the turbulence and dangers of North Belfast in the middle ‘70’s – through the parading controversies of Portadown in the ‘90’s and on into life as a bishop and church leader.

Clergy are probably the last great amateurs – privileged to have a go at almost everything. The traditional ministry – community reconciler, fixer of the wifi, journalist, broadcaster, international diplomat, social media practitioner, strategic leader, creative shaper of liturgy, poet, person of prayer.

But in the end I come back to the shepherding images of the gospel reading today. And I think particularly of the ministry which I had over nearly 20 years as a hospital chaplain. Sitting often in the middle of the night with people whom I had never met before and would never meet again – a young mother whose child fell out of a tree and was fatally injured on a sunny Saturday. Months later she came back to meet all the hospital staff who had been there for her. To me she said – ‘I remember you holding my hand’. I might have said to her vocationally ‘My hand was for you the hand of God who will never let you go’. But actually I said ‘Thank you’ and went home blinking through my tears.