Maundy Thursday 170414

1 Sam 3: 1-10 Rev 1: 5b-8 Luke 7: 36-50

Today is a day of vocation. During the nine years that I have been your bishop, I have found myself thinking more and more about the nature of vocation. I think about how it is experienced – about how it is recognised and validated – about how it is sustained and nurtured – about how it functions under pressure – about how it survives the long haul of ministry in myself and others.

The readings today invite us to begin a contemplation of the nature of calling. The call of Samuel reminds us that vocation may announce itself early – but also, dare I say it, that vocation may best be recognised by others more than by ourselves. Revelation reminds us that it is about service – about wounded healers and reconciled reconcilers. And if it is about service, that means that vocation and ministry are not primarily about us. And finally we meet that most difficult of gospel stories – the women with the precious ointment. For me today this story is about an immoderate expansiveness of loving. I’m a chap. I don’t find that easy. And I do think that part of what we are called to is that we should be the most fully human, the most earthed, the most realistic people around. We deal not in fantasies or wishful thinking but in the reality of life as God gives it and redemption as Christ bought it. And yet vocation gives us the potential to throw ourselves away in an ecstasy of immoderate loving and worship.

In the days before everything got complicated, I think I treated vocation as a sort of shorthand – an easy explanation for why I was doing what I did. I had a vocation so I was ordained. And of course there are people who play the same thing back to us – ‘Of course it’s different for you – you have a vocation’. But when I hear those words I am on guard against an easy taking for granted which needs to be resisted.

But, whether or not vocation was a shorthand, it was and remains very real for me. I still experience it as a physical entity in my life. I am daily aware that vocation means that there is an area at the centre of my life in which I have ceded control. And the most obvious sign of that for me is the story of how I came to be here with you and what has happened in the years since.

When Martyn Percy of Ripon College, Cuddesdon, came to our Clergy Conference a couple of years ago, he told us that his children described his ministry as ‘going around cheering people up’.

Increasingly I see the sense of that. I think that much of my own ministry – and of the ministry which we have towards one another – is one of rekindling vocation. It’s blowing very gently on the embers to see if flame can be rekindled. If we mix the metaphors for a moment - vocation is a tender plant. Exhaustion and frustration wither it. Self-centredness strangles it. Unsympathetic abuse and criticism cause it to take cover and ultimately crush it altogether

And what sustains it?

Prayer of course. I would say that. But it’s true for me - because prayer protects us from self-preoccupation – and prayer wards off the insistent voice of disappointment which tells us that somehow this isn’t quite as we hoped it might be.

And for me vocation is sustained by a constant sort of internal dialogue – about meaning and hope; about connectedness; about what I see; about making sure that the space between God and myself doesn’t grow larger than is wise.

And another thing – vocation has to be used. So it seems to me that it is about constantly heading into situations which demand more than we have – heading onwards our ears ringing with the voices of those who want to know whether it will work or what will happen – yet heading onwards still because vocation tells us that we can do no other.

Strange thing vocation. Sometimes a burden we might rather be rid of. Sometimes a transforming joy. Sometimes a source of envy to the curious – those who, in a world where it is assumed that our calling will be to our own self-interest, wonder about the opposite.

Today we thank God for the gift of vocation. We thank God for the ministry to which we are called. We thank God for one another. We thank God for our family and friends who share in and support our vocations – even though they didn’t choose it for themselves. May God’s will be done.