

Sermon for All Saints' Highgate, Sunday, 6 February 2022

God's Calling You – and Us (Isaiah 6:1-8)

⁶ In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. ² Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³ And one called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.' ⁴ The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.

⁵ And I said: 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!' ⁶ Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷ The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: 'Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.' ⁸ Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!'

What does it take to have a vocation? That's the question our reading from Isaiah raises for us. And the idea of exploring a vocation, or a calling, is what I'd like to consider with you this morning.

The first point to register about any true sense of vocation or calling, is that it's God who does the calling. What we humans do is simply respond to the prompting of God's Spirit. In the case of the prophet Isaiah, when the Lord says, "Whom shall I send?" Isaiah pipes up, 'Send me!' As our narrative reveals, there's a back-story to Isaiah's willingness: an exposure to the holiness – the complete otherness of God; followed by a unique experience of purification by a messenger from God.

But Isaiah's response isn't the only option. I recall my experience of feeling a renewed sense of call to ordained ministry in the Church of England, which arose in 2009 and 2010. I had a strong sense both of feeling called, *and* of wanting to say to God: 'No, no, no – you must be joking! You'd have to be mad to want to be a vicar. Surely not me?' This response was certainly shaped by my earlier experience as director of the charity Bridge Builders, in which I'd seen some of the dark side of church life, and observed how some parish clergy could be eaten up or emotionally destroyed by parish ministry. So, responding warmly and positively to a call from God isn't a foregone conclusion: we can find ourselves resistant to God's calling.

Now when you think of what a vocation looks like, I wouldn't be surprised if what first comes to mind is a calling to one of the classic professions, such as a priest, doctor, architect or a lawyer. And it's true that it often takes a clear sense of call to pursue one of these distinctive vocations. However, vocation in the sense that we're exploring this morning is certainly not limited to those historic professions. For a start, sometimes the vocation may be an accident of birth.

Earlier this week, Archbishop Justin Welby made some observations about Queen Elizabeth II. He likened the Queen's role as monarch to a lifelong religious vocation. He said, 'The coronation service is a form of ordination, in a liturgical sense. It's priestly: the language, the structure, are very similar to the ordination of a priest or bishop.' And Archbishop Justin added: 'And the Queen lives out her vocation without a grumble.' The Archbishop highlighted how the Queen has embraced her vocation, and has committed herself to a life of duty and public service. Which at one level may seem glamorous and luxurious. But which is also costly, being lived out under intense and constant public scrutiny – not something I imagine any of us would really relish. And the Queen's commitment to that life of duty and public service was epitomised for the Archbishop by the Queen sitting completely alone at the funeral of her husband of over 70 years, in observance of the Covid restrictions in force at the time.

Being a monarch, through the inheritance of birth, is another form of vocation, one to which Queen Elizabeth has responded over the last seven decades with a clear 'Here I am – send me'. But it's not a calling that any of us can closely relate to. So what, you might ask, does a calling, a vocation have to do with you? My conviction is that it is deeply relevant to you. Because at the heart of any vocation is fulfilling God's purpose for your life. Now there may be part of you thinking, 'Does the God of the universe really have a clear and specific purpose for my life?' And this is where you may find yourself relating to Isaiah's sense of unworthiness, and even his cry of 'Woe is me!' But if you're genuinely committed to wanting to know what God is calling you to, then there's one thing I can promise you. God - will - speak. [repeat] For God has a vocation for each and every one of us, and longs for us to hear the Holy Spirit's voice.

Let's assume that you genuinely want to hear God's calling for you. And let's imagine that you have a sense of being prompted by the Holy Spirit. An inner sense of what you're called to. It may well link up with something you're passionate about, or care deeply about. Those passions and desires will often find their source in God. Sometimes, for those of a working age, there can be a close correspondence between one's work and one's sense of calling, the things one is passionate about, the place where you want to make a difference. That's ideal when it happens; and, when it does, it's to be celebrated. But for others, for example for those who've finished paid employment, this won't seem relevant. For you, the question is more about what sort of role you're called to, whether within the family, the church, a voluntary organisation, or the wider community. So this is as equally relevant to an unemployed school leaver, a homemaker, or a retired person. God's still got something distinctive for you to contribute to the world. And it's likely to be linked to what you really care about, and what you've got a heart for.

Let's now assume that you've got some sense of what God is calling you to. At this point, you may find various competing thoughts jumping in. At a most basic level might be the questions: 'Am I really hearing God? Do I *really* want to hear God's voice?' More common perhaps will be the question: 'Perhaps I'm mistaken in what I've heard? Can this really be what God wants of me?' And underlying this may be the question: 'Am I worthy enough, or capable enough, to fulfil this calling?' I can honestly say that I'm all too familiar with these voices. In 2019, along with a group of trustees, I launched a new charity called Reconciliation Initiatives. We offered a learning and development programme for Anglican church leaders, who would be sponsored by their Bishop, in groups of four from a diocese. And we were just recruiting our first cohort, to begin the programme in July 2020, when the pandemic hit, in the spring of that year. Suddenly we had to decide whether to press ahead and try and deliver a completely online programme. This was instead of beginning with a residential learning week, at the start of the 18-month programme. Throughout 2020 I kept wondering whether I'd really been responding to God's sense of call in launching this new programme; or whether, in fact, I was just crazy and deluded. At one level, it seemed to be a fulfilment of my calling as an adult educator. But there were huge question marks about whether the programme would prove effective, and whether it would add any value to what else was on offer to develop Anglican clergy and their churches. And if I'm honest, it's only now, after the initial cohort have completed the first programme, that it's becoming clear that, yes, this programme is helpful, and making a qualitative difference, relative to other available offerings. But it's taken a stack of faith – especially by the trustees and others around me – to keep trusting that both I, and the charity's trustees, had heard God's call for our charity correctly.

All of which is a way of saying that you need to expect that, at times, you may be assailed by doubts or misgivings about what God's call on your life may be. In my experience, that's normal. It's rare to be continually certain of your calling.

The antidote to such doubts and misgivings is to remember that our vocation or calling is not simply a private matter. It's always something to be tested with other people. Vocation and calling is therefore a matter for communal discernment. Partly this is because others can sometimes know us better than we know ourselves. And partly it's because that's the way that God speaks through the Holy Spirit – to many of us at once, and not just to an individual in isolation, as, at first glance, appears to be the case with the prophet Isaiah. This also means that if you're currently struggling to work out what God is calling you to, then a good place to start is by meeting with one or two others whom you trust - preferably people with an openness and sensitivity to God and God's Spirit. And to begin praying together regularly, maybe once a week, asking the Spirit to

speak to you about what God is calling you to. I'm confident that if you seek God's voice in this way, that you will surely find what God has in store for you.

This corporate aspect of hearing God's voice is also God's way of providing a safeguard about an individual becoming convinced that they're called to be or do something which others can clearly discern isn't what God's got in store for them. Because we can all have a tendency to delude ourselves at times. This, for me, is one of the reassuring aspects of the Church of England's process for working with those sensing a call to ordained ministry: the vocation has to be tested out and affirmed by many other people before the individual's sense of call is confirmed – or not, as is sometimes the case.

So far, we've focussed on our calling or vocation as individuals. However, it would be a mistake to stop there. Because the truth is that each corporate group has a distinctive vocation or calling. That can be true for a family. I believe it's also true for a nation. And it's most certainly true for a local church such as us here at All Saints. The question is then, 'What is God calling us to, as a small and struggling community based on the edge of Highgate, but scattered over a larger area of North London? What is our vocation as a church?' That's certainly a question that I believe our Parochial Church Council should be wrestling with. But, I also believe, it's a question which all of us who are part of this body have a duty to ask ourselves. And to find a way to contribute what we might be hearing from God. Because God has a distinctive vocation for All Saints' Highgate, here in 2022. And it could well be a different calling than, say, in 2002, or in 1982. Because vocation can evolve over time, especially for a local church. What's God's vocation for us, today? What's the purpose of this church still being here on the edge of Highgate, nearly 160 years after it was founded? I don't know the answer to those questions. But it's for us to reflect on and consider together.

And considering these questions connects us with the bigger picture of Isaiah's call that we're exploring today. Because this isn't just about one Israelite prophet. It's also about God's vocation for the whole people of Israel. In that sense Isaiah is really representative of a whole nation. A nation that God had called to be a blessing to all the other nations of the earth; a sign of God's love for the world; and, an assurance that God has a purpose for each individual, each family, each community, each nation, and indeed for the community of nations. Because, while this God does have an individual relationship with each of us, this God is also the God of the whole cosmos. There is thus, as Isaiah grasps here, an infinite, qualitative difference between us as creatures, and the great Creator God. And, knowing our own sinfulness and shortcomings, standing before this holy, holy God will cause us to tremble, as Isaiah did.

But the good, and astonishing news is this. That this amazing, holy Creator God, calls each one of us, and us as a local church, to be part of sharing God's love with the world, in our own distinctive ways. Let us therefore be ready to say, 'Here am I; send me!' and 'Here we are, Lord, send us!' Thus we will fulfil our vocations, given to us by God. May it be so. Amen.