

Sermon Vocations Sunday Kempsey 31 January 2021
Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany

In a research project that was done a few years ago, the researcher interviewed some nuns, most of whom had been religious sisters for well over 40 years.

The researcher asked them to describe their original call to the religious life.

She then asked them to describe how they saw their call now.

In almost every case, the reasons why they were still exercising a ministry in the church after so many years, were quite different from why they responded to God's call in the first place, and in most cases the nature of their ministries was quite different as well, in response to the changing needs of Gods mission.

One of the sisters said that it was a continuous process of choosing to say "yes" many times to God's call.

Another said that over the decades, in the course of life, the commitment to the original call can take on renewed vitality if we intentionally open ourselves to the Holy Spirit.

This call of God on our lives is a tremendous privilege.

How we respond to the call and live it out, is our vocation. The call and the vocation are not static or unchanging.

God's call, and our response, are dynamic. They change depending on what God and the church requires of us, guided by the Holy Spirit.

I am talking about call and vocation today for two reasons.

1. It's vocation Sunday – a day set aside for us to reflect on our call, and pray, that more people will consider lay and ordained ministry in the church. This relates to personal call and service.
2. Vocation underlies our diocesan vision and mission statement AND it underlies the current restructure – so the BiC has called for an exploration of this and other themes that underpin the restructure and mission. This relates to communal call and the identity and mission of local churches as well as the whole diocese.

So no matter what angle you're approaching this from (personal call or a communal one) Healthy questions for every Christian to ask include these ones:

How am I responding to God's call now? How am I using my gifts?

Whatever our answers, we should always be open to the HS's prompting to renew and revitalise our response to God's call.

You might well say that "I'm too old to start training for lay or ordained ministry now" or, "I've done my bit" – and that's okay, but you're not off the hook entirely.

In my experience, there is a place for people to tap others on the shoulder, to encourage them to consider the call of God in their life. In today's Gospel Jesus calls some of the first disciples, and they follow quickly and eagerly. But in my experience, people are hesitant and unsure; they tend to hold back. They respond well to affirmation and encouragement.

As the prayer card for today says: pray for just one person whom you think that God might be calling to ministry. That's a role for everyone.

But God doesn't just call individuals. He calls whole communities, as we see in the scriptures. So these questions about call, vocation and the use of gifts are questions for parishes too.

For communities too, the call and the response are always changing in relation to what is needed as part of God's mission in every time and place.

Recently I've been reading the book "The Fountain of Public Prosperity: Evangelical Christians in Australian History 1740-1910" (the 2019 Australian Christian Book of the Year Winner).

It highlights that the work of the many Christian denominations in this country from the mid 1800s to the early 20th Century was to build churches in every Australian community.

This building program, which Anglicans (inc Anglicans in Grafton Diocese) responded to very enthusiastically, is no longer our call. God is calling us to something very different.

The Grafton Diocese Restructure for Mission and Ministry recognises that God is calling us to new ways of being the church in a post-Christian society.

So Church communities should be asking:

what and who is God calling your parish community to be and do?

What are your gifts as a church community, and how can you use them most effectively for his mission in your community?

Your answers to these questions will be very different to the way that the pioneers

of your parish would have answered them many years ago.

That's because God's call, and his mission, are dynamic.

In the reading from Acts today we read about a Christian community that was devoted to the way of Jesus – both his teaching and his life. They intentionally and consciously identified with Jesus and lived, as Jesus would have them live. As we think about our call, gifts and vocation as a Christian community here, are we intentionally defining ourselves in this way?

The author of the recently published book “The Last Pastor” interviewed the clergy and key lay leaders of small churches in North America that were closing, or that had recently closed.

She found that congregations that saw themselves as

“settlers with a home in a sacred space”

(such as in a much-loved church building)

had enormous difficulty in finding a new sense of vocation upon the closure of their church,

On the other hand, congregations that saw themselves as “pilgrims on a spiritual journey”

found it easier to hear God's call to something new, and discern a new purpose and direction for their parish community.

Are we pilgrims on a spiritual journey, focused on, and adaptable to, God's call to mission? ...

... or are we simply settlers with a home in a much-loved building?

Another great challenge of our time, COVID-19, also presents vocational questions.

Experience and research has shown that major disasters such as wars, natural disasters, and pandemics, are followed by a period of reconstruction which involve creating new ways of life, and a focus on growth.

During reconstruction, spiritual questions surface for people who had not previously been religious.

How can we use our gifts as church communities to engage with, and minister to, a society that is being re-imagined and re-built after COVID19?

In Ephesians 2:10 we read ...

'For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life'.

Vocation then, is always a response to God.

We are what he has made us.

We are who he has called us to be.

As Abp William Temple once said, "what is clear is that the King is calling, and we must answer".

Our answer, our response, our vocation, needs always to be open to what may unfold before us through the Holy Spirit's prompting.

If you'd like to explore questions about our common calling, such as "What are our gifts as a parish or church community?" and "What and who is God calling us to be and do?" then there are some resources available for small group study and further reflection.

If you're thinking about your personal call and vocation, such as to Lay or Ordained Ministry, there are lots of opportunities for authorised lay ministry and ordained ministry in Grafton Diocese. Some literature available here today.