

Sermon: VOCATION/ EXPLORING GOD'S PLANS FOR OUR LIVES St Martin's 18.11.17

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen

Earlier this month, on two consecutive Saturday mornings, Tina and I ran a course for the Benefice on 'Exploring God's plans for our lives', and I'd like to share what it was about with those of you who couldn't make it. We based it on a diocesan course entitled: 'Here I am. Vocation and Calling.' Gary changed the name because there are preconceived ideas about vocation, both in society at large and in church usage. Society recognises certain careers as vocational, like nursing and teaching. People are not enticed into these careers by any perceived perks, even things like long school holidays because it is recognised that these are the sort of jobs that people should feel called to do. Which is what the word 'vocation' means – from the Latin 'vocare' 'to call'. People feel cut out for these vocational careers. It's what they feel they are meant to do. Similarly, in the Church, when someone has a vocation, we tend to think of this as vocation to ministry: first and foremost, the ordained ministry, but also lay ministry and the vocation to be nuns and monks. Indeed, when someone feels such a calling, they are put through a rigorous process of 'testing their vocation'.

Gary changed the name of the course to 'Exploring God's plans for our lives' because he wanted us to think much more widely than these traditional ideas of vocation. And rightly so, because we believe that all of us have a vocation. We believe that God has a purpose for each and every one of us and that it's important to explore God's call on our lives. No one is here just to make up the numbers! We are all special to God. We all have a vocation from God our Creator and our fulfilment lies in finding and following that vocation. That is why we advertised the course as being for everyone, and it was good to see that the ages of people who attended ranged from the teens to the eighties!

The course started on this tack. Showing us through a number of Bible passages that each one of us is unique, and how special we are to God our Father. We read together Psalm 139:

'Lord, you examine me and know me, you know every detail of my conduct ...

It was you who created my inmost self, and put me together in my mother's womb ...'

And a similar passage in Jeremiah tells how God had a plan for him from the very beginning, just as he has a plan for each of us:

‘Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you

And before you were born I consecrated you.

I appointed you a prophet to the nations.’ (Jer 1.4-5)

And Jesus said, ‘Even the hairs of your head are numbered. So don’t be afraid.’ (Mt 10.30)

LULL: Ezekiel

The next section of the course was about listening to God and how we discern his call on our lives. We looked together at a number of passages where God had called famous people like Samuel and Mary – and discussed what we could learn from them. For example, we noticed God’s persistence in his call of Samuel; and we recognised that God may have to nudge us many times before we realise that this is what he wants of us. The call of Samuel also taught us that God may call the least expected person: Samuel the altar boy rather than Eli the chief priest. Not everyone, like Mary, has a visitation from the Angel Gabriel; or a Damascus moment like St Paul; and we discussed the many different ways that God can speak to us today, such as through prayer, Bible reading, a Christian friend, even sermons! The important thing is to be ready to listen to God – to give him time and space. Sometimes we just need to stop talking – and to reflect on things that we have read and heard. In our busy, noisy lives, we need to make space for God.

In the third session of the course, we thought about our gifts and talents. We filled in a questionnaire that helped us to see where our strengths lie. Different statements led people to see if their strengths lie in evangelising, or teaching, or encouraging, or giving, or administering, or helping and caring. We scored ourselves against statements like: ‘I am ready to overlook my own interests so that the needs of others may be met’, or ‘I can make people feel at ease’, or ‘I stand up for the truth whenever there is an opportunity.’ I know that some people were surprised at the outcome.

We also read the story of the call of Moses in this session, when God commissioned him to return to Egypt and lead the Hebrews out of slavery there. Moses is the greatest figure in the Old Testament and the Exodus from Egypt the greatest salvation event in the Old Testament. ‘But Moses said to God, “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the

Israelites out of Egypt?" ... Moses said to the Lord, "O Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue." The Lord said to him, "Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say.'" (Exod 3.11, 4.10-12) So God may be calling us to use our current skills and talents, but he may also be calling us to new things. Whatever our calling, we can trust God to provide what we need to fulfil his calling.

Today is our patronal festival, when we remember St Martin, Bishop of Tours and a patron saint of France. He lived in the 4th century, and his calling came about through his response to an everyday event, and it led him to change direction completely in his life. He was a Christian, pursuing a military career when, feeling sorry for a poor beggar, shivering in the cold, he cut his heavy cloak in two and shared it with the beggar. That night he saw Jesus in a dream, seated on his throne, and wearing the other half of Martin's cloak! It reminded him of the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, where Jesus said, 'Whatever you do to one of the least of these, my brothers, you do to me.' Soon after this he left the army and became a monk, founding the first monastery in Gaul and encouraging the spread of monasticism there. His holiness led to him being appointed Bishop of Tours about 12 years later. For some, like St Martin, God's call will be to give up everything; for others, God calls you to stay where you are; for others there will be a balance to be struck between these two.

After thinking and discussing what we can learn from other people's calling, we did some more work trying to understand ourselves better, looking at our personalities and preferences. Recognising that we are all different and gifted in different ways, Tina went through some of the other courses that the Diocese offers to help us focus on areas that we are interested in pursuing. For example, Dorothy will soon be leading a course here on helping and caring for anyone interested in pastoral work.

Our course finished with a session entitled 'Dreaming'. We thought about a typical week and how we currently spend our time. It made us think about our priorities and where we think God may be leading us. We thought about three levels of vocation. Firstly: how we are

all called, from the moment of baptism or conversion, to grow as Christians. We have set out on a Christian journey through life, and we should take seriously how we attend to our spiritual growth, whatever period of life we are in. It's too easy to get stuck in a siding.

Secondly: vocation covers the things we do with our time and the roles we play: our work, life with our family and friends, and our church life. We are called to live out our Christian faith in all these arenas, and to do what we can to help.

And thirdly, there is a unique calling that each of us has: 'the thing that makes our heart sing.' Do you remember the film, Chariots of Fire? Eric Liddell, our Olympic champion, said, 'God has made me fast, and when I run I feel his pleasure.' For some of our church members, it's gardening that makes their heart sing – and you will see them out and about in the village in their high-vis jackets, making Eynsford bloom. For some, it's singing, and choristers and Helen are here Sunday by Sunday, offering their gifts and enhancing our worship of God. For some it's baking cakes or shortbread, so that we can offer hospitality. For some it's teaching in homegroups. For another it's sharing poetry or art ... What makes your heart sing?

Let us pray:

Dear Father, You have loved us from the moment we were conceived, and you have gifted us in many different ways. Help us to listen to your call on our lives; and through our lives may 'others be drawn into the arms of your love, and the whole world begin to sing your praises. Amen' (*source unknown*)