

## Sermon – Spirituality, Discernment and Vocation

As a way in I offer a story and a poem.

It is told of theologian, Donald Nicholl,

That once, when part of a group, where each in turn introduced themselves, when it came to his turn declared 'Who am I? I am a glorious manifestation of the love of God!' Whilst running the risk of being one of the most pretentious ways of introducing himself, there is also a profound truth in his declaration. Are we not all 'glorious manifestations of the love of God'? Have you ever considered yourself a 'glorious manifestation of the love of God'?

Mary Oliver in her poem 'The Summer Day' writes

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.  
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?

We may not today be resonating with summer idleness, of falling down into the grass (snow perhaps!), but we may resonate with the questions - what have I been doing all day? What should I have done? What am I doing with my one wild and precious life?

### Personal Story

Some years ago when I was a parish priest in Sheffield, whilst having a sense of continuing ministry in the parish for several years more, I was astonished to find myself saying 'Wouldn't it would be wonderful to be part of an

organisation that would let me focus on spirituality, retreat giving and spiritual direction'.

To which I seemed to hear an inner voice saying: You are?

My response was, 'Don't be daft - I'm in the Church of England'!

You are?

Am I? – so began a new way of thinking about the future and conversations with the Bishop which in nine months led to a new stage of my 'vocation'. I became Bishop's advisor in Spirituality - and thrust into doing exactly what I had found myself longing for. It seemed it was possible for the church of England to enable such a ministry.

It was a ministry for which I had no obvious qualifications for, and necessitated some swift work to engage in.

### **Particularly, I needed a working definition of spirituality**

I came up with 'Spirituality is about "Who am I?" in relation to God, others and self – and how do I live this out?'

There is a clear resonance with our New Testament reading in which Jesus' summarises the commandments:

love the lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. Love your neighbour as yourself

Here we see the three dimensions of spirituality – God, neighbour, self – God, others, self.

### **Our Old Testament Reading is an encounter between the boy Samuel, the old priests Eli and God**

#### **Imagine this from Eli's point of view**

Eli, is asleep when Samuel bursts in - You called Master

Eli – grumpily - no I didn't, go back to bed. Thinking to himself – child must have been dreaming

Eli just as he gets off to sleep is disturbed by Samuel again - You called Master

Eli - Tetchier now: No I didn't. Go back to bed and get some sleep

For a 3rd time his sleep is disturbed - Samuel bursts in again - You called?

Eli - thinking to himself - Not again, I'll tan his hide - but then his better self kicks in - there must be something else going on here. Maybe there's a spiritual explanation! How can I help the lad? He offers, perhaps the first bit of spiritual direction in the bible – Samuel, if you hear the voice again, respond by saying 'Speak Lord your servant is listening

Samuel returns and responds to the voice as Eli suggested

So begins for Samuel a journey of close relationship with God through a time of turmoil for the nation. Samuel becomes a prophet and priest - go between God and people – and is instrumental in transition to establishing Saul as first king of Israel.

### **Samuel's call is a step in him living out his vocation – doing what he was meant to do with his one wild and precious life.**

The book of Samuel goes on to show how Samuel lived out 'who I am meant to be' in relationship with God, the people and himself.

### **Vocation**

It could be concluded from stories such as this that God only deals with some 'spiritual elite' with profound calls and vocations such as Samuel's' but this would fly in the face of both biblical understandings and human experience

In Psalm 139 the Psalmist describes

*When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body.*

*All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.*

A reminder of the intimate knowledge of every person that God has – and a sense of purpose for them.

### **Scripture - call of individual is typical of God's working with each person**

The Gospel writers clearly assume that the call of Jesus to the disciples to follow him, is a call they expect those who read the gospels to recognise as a call they are invited to respond to. To find their vocation in their response to his call.

### **This is something that personal experience in my life and that of people I have known testify to.**

One of the most striking conversations I have had about vocation was talking to someone who was a truck driver – he spent his weeks driving juggernauts around Europe - and described the wonderful enjoyment and fulfilment he has in doing the job. His face lit up as he described his sense of vocation – that he was doing what God wanted him to do – what he was meant to be doing with his life.

### **In conclusion – I offer some pointers in exploring vocation**

#### **Firstly: prayerful listening and reflecting**

Listen to your self: to the cries, longings and urges of your heart

- may be a kind of voice
- may be a deep longing
- it may be recognising facts of your life - what inspires and energises you - and what others recognise and value in you

Engage with God: acknowledging the promptings that you may be sensing

- talking to God – asking 'is this you?'
- seeking truth

Engage with others: Talk about your exploring vocation

- about the nudges and encouragements others give you
- seeking perspective and guidance
- look at 'is this God - or just me?'
- - vocation - by its nature is something beyond self

**Secondly: (and this is the 'health warning') recognise that by responding to this life will change and it will involve risk, growth and challenge**

After all – it will take you beyond yourself – therefore it will feel risky and challenging and involve you growing as vocation unfolds. Vocation may involve a sense of the big trajectory of life, but the steps and stages along the way are likely to emerge step by step.

## **Conclusion**

The story of Samuel and the teaching of Jesus give us pointers in the exploration of our spirituality and vocation.

We are invited to reflect on what helps us listen and discern the God of love who knows you and calls us to respond – to become the people we were created to be.

To find an answer to the question 'what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?'