

As we work together with Christ, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, at an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.

Sitting quietly on the top of Newton Tor in the Cheviot Hills in Northumberland the sun just beginning to set, darkness creeping like a shadowy blanket across the fells the wind blowing fiercely I discovered a cleft in the hilltop and I nestled within it, protected from the elements all I could see was the last remnants of the sun slowly disappearing when gently out of the ending of the day came a new beginning, an awakening like a chrysalis slowly breaking open, something new and of great beauty suddenly emerging, and life was never to be the same again.

This is what is meant by the transfiguring nature of a calling from God.

For when he touches our heart there is no going back, a call from God cannot be ignored it can of course be put on hold, but there will come a time when the call like the butterfly slowly emerging from its chrysalis will be ready to unfurl its wings to dry them in the sun and then to take to the air

Responding to a sense of call is deeply personal and yet there is also something more which is difficult to speak of, it cannot be formulated into simple words as it is too deep, too unique it is a sign and a sealing of ones heart into the Christ-like role of a servant, as Paul puts it as servants of God, we have commended ourselves in every way.

Servant-hood is not an element of personal choice widely accepted in today's society. It is generally considered a sign of weakness a lack of success it is a term which is difficult to equate to leadership. For servant-hood does not speak of power and glory it speaks of subservience, of obedience it is the role of the servant to serve her master.

Who wants to be a servant?

In the ordinal from the Book of Common Prayer the Bishop says to those about to be ordained Priest the following:

Will you reverently obey your Ordinary and other chief Ministers, unto whom is committed the charge and government over you; following with a glad mind and will their godly admonitions and submitting yourselves to their godly judgements?

To which the potential Priests reply:

I will so do, the Lord being my helper

Servant-hood brings with it a willingness to be obedient to God and to his Church, which demands of those called; to seek to be Christ-like in all that they do.

But what does it mean to be Christ-like in the world today. How are those who are called by God to respond and how are they to engage in that sense of calling which will allow them like the butterfly to be transfigured by God and so released into their full potential?

This challenge for those touched by the hand of God, called by Christ into service is in part met by the discernment of others, but the beginning of any exploration into a sense of vocation does not start with us but starts here in the very heart of the worshipping community of Christ. For it is from within you, that God will call. I may have heard the voice of God on the top of Newton Tor and my heart and mind captured by his grace may have been filled in a way that was beyond explanation but it had to be grounded in reality before it could be acted upon.

My Parish Priest and my worshipping Community were central to my growth both of my understanding of what God had placed upon me, but also of why he had done so. This was the beginning of an awareness of the nature of servant-hood.

This challenge is of course nothing new men and women have been called by God for generations, into service and into the role of a servant. In the book of Kings we find an excellent example of a sense of call and a following of one to another, Elisha follows Elijah his master and has done so throughout his prophetic ministry but the time has come for a change there is to be a transfiguration and a ministry ends whilst another begins.

Elijah says: The Lord has sent me as far as Bethel, stay here I pray, but Elisha says I will not leave you, and from this devotion to service Elijah allows him to journey with him, There is of course an element in this story which also speaks of personal ambition for through his devotion and service Elisha longs to become Elijah's successor, and seeing Elijah transfigured into glory assures him of his goal.

But ambition is not the key to the story of Elisha it is service, He served first and then and only then did he hope for that service to be recognised.

I would like at this point to draw out parallels in those who offer themselves for service in God's Church today, and although they are drawn from John Pritchard on the life and work of a priest they are equally attributable to the many existing and emerging ministries into which the Lord is calling his people today.

I have chosen only four elements from Pritchard's work and will explore their significance for the Church and for those being called to serve within it.

The first is the call to be a Spiritual Explorer

We are all called to have deep and meaningful prayer lives but it is often the case that the business of life often relegates this prayerful activity to limited periods of engagement.

Prayer is a crucial element of our Christian lives and for those exploring a sense of calling from God it is of utmost importance.

Prayer is often the medium through which our sense of calling comes and it is prayer which in itself has the power to transfigure. The account of the transfiguration of Jesus Christ serves to remind his disciples then and now of his ultimate glory and his own sense of calling. He is joined by Elijah engaging with a transfiguration of the past which reminds us that any calling even that of the divine is something which is continuous and eternal.

There is within every calling today an element of continuity which connects us to Jesus. And Clive Marsh captures this beautifully in his work on Christology. Marsh recognises that theology begins with a human experience that is interpretable as the presence and action of God as known in Christ, and as known through our experience of and interpretation of doctrinal tradition. Through the compilation of both experience and tradition a sense of call is grounded in the reality of the past as well as in the present. Prayerful engagement is the medium through which we become Spiritual explorers.

The second element of a call from God is in having and upholding an Iconic Presence. We as Christians are all called to live out a Christian life, and to be a living witness to the faith, those called by God to be priestly become in the words of Austin Farrer The privilege of being a kind of walking sacrament an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace which is recognised by others as the presence of Christ in the community.

This is a distinctive call placed upon those ordained into the priesthood, but alongside that distinctiveness lies the priesthood of all believers, through which and in which we are all engaged with the reality of living out our faith within the context of our lives.

For many this today will be a calling from God to be a minister in the workplace, it may mean that for many amongst you that God through Christ and through the office of ordination is now seeking to explore the sacramental nature implicit within our secular environment. This today is opening up many new approaches to ministry and the iconic presence of Christ in the Community is being reimagined. God is calling us out to re-examine and explore wider possibilities of service. We are being challenged by the Holy Spirit of God to recognise within ourselves that to which we are all being called. It is through our engagement with our community wherever that may be realised that we can truly become an iconic presence to others.

This leads us nicely to the third element of the distinctiveness of a vocational calling and that is to be an attractive witness, a means through which we point others to Christ. All Christians are witnesses and should be able to give a reason for the hope that is in them. For some however that could be a call to consider living in a distinctive community. The monastic life is not for everyone however there is within it a sense of re-engagement with an authenticated spiritual life which is centred on generous hospitality, challenging reconciliation and centres of attentiveness to the living God.

My own experiences of the joy of such engagement was in spending some of my early study time for ministry with the Society of the Sacred Mission in Durham, an open community but one which created an oasis of peace and prayerfulness within the context of city life, creating an alternative yet deeply attractive means of witnessing to Christ. Of course you do not have to join a religious community to be a witness to Christ in this way, one needs merely to recognise how by being attentive

to the self and to one's body that we can effectively give witness to Jesus.

Archbishop Rowan reminds us that Christianity encourages us to be faithful to the body that I am a living body that can be hurt, a body that is always living in the middle of limitations: it encourages me to accept unavoidable frustration in this material and accident prone existence without anger. To talk about pledging the body to the walls in the sense of the fundamental decision to be where and who I am. In order to truly respond to a call from God we are called first to know ourselves more fully. And in the words of Amma Syncletica You can be a solitary in your mind even when you live in the middle of a crowd. And you can be a solitary and still live in the middle of the crowd of your own thoughts. Here we see another distinctive means of witnessing to Jesus through a call into the solitary life but a life which can still be fully integrated into community, and a life which again is transfigured and brought alive and given power to transform and encourage others through the simplicity of the offering to God of oneself.

My fourth element draws us from the being qualities of a sense of call into the more practical doing qualities and in order to do one needs to be able to be a creative leader. God calls those who can by their lives and witness encourage enable and build up the faith in others. In today's church, leadership is undergoing a transfiguration. It is not just adapting, or picking up models of operation from the secular world but is being given the authority of the past and the present in order to prepare for the future. Creative leaders in the church according to Pritchard need to be able to scan the horizon, keep themselves aware of the bigger picture and act as a cultural analyst asking always for the wisdom and mind of Christ as they seek to creatively engage with church and community, This is what Christian Leadership has been but is it what the Church needs today?

What do we look for when we consider the transfiguring nature of a calling from God?

Particularly in Leadership we have seen the glory of God revealed in splendour not when the Vicar is the person who does everything or controls everything but rather when the vicar can give his blessing to that which needs to be done, A very creative book on church leadership is Jesus Driven Ministry by Ajith Fernando who was the Director of Youth for Christ in Sri Lanka.

Creative leadership speaks of an authority to lead not by what is said and done but rather by what and who you are. In seeking leadership potential having led a worship group or an alpha course or being an effective Youth Minister as important as these things are do not necessarily show that you possess the qualities in leadership which the church requires today. Pioneer ministry has often been said still to be in its infancy and in many respects that is true because the traditional church still struggles to catch hold of what it is that it offers which is different. However all leaders in the church whether they be ordained or not have to have a level of creative ability. It is essential that leaders help to stimulate vision but then have the ability to hold the vision together in powerful prayerful presence whilst allowing others to engage in how the vision is worked out in practicality. Leadership is today being transfigured like Christ, The Christian church is to be filled with the power of God and others are to witness its glory, its continuity and its creativity.

And it is those qualities which we see in Jesus himself when he silences the storm, for here he uses power over nature in order to reveal his power to change, stimulate and transform every aspect of our very being.

To recognise and feel the transforming nature of a calling from God we must first of all look for it in our worshipping communities, encourage it to grow and to flourish through

building people up into that which God has called them to be. Re-imagining Ministry is exactly what it says, it is not how we can change what we have but rather how we can begin to recognise afresh that which the Church really needs. Re-imagining ministry is not about filling the gaps and enabling that which we have to continue but rather it is to recognise the need for change the need for some abandonment and the necessity of reforming the church into the creative and dynamic force it can truly be

When gently out of the ending of the day came a new beginning, an awakening like a chrysalis slowly breaking open, something new and of great beauty suddenly emerging and life was never to be the same again.

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I conclude with a prayer from John Pritchard:

Gracious God,

You have given us the privilege of an open door to your presence.

When life is shining and full, inhabit our joy.

When life is grinding slowly on, touch us with your life.

When we long for a clearer vision of you, open our gauze-covered eyes.

When we studiously avoid your gaze, tempt us with your forgiving smile.

Lead us inexorably to the fulfilment of our lives in the service of your Son.

So that, dipped in God and cherished by your Spirit, we may come to you, three times blessed,

Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen.