

# SERMON, ST JOHN'S EPIPHANY 5

We may not know it or recognize it, but every one of us is called, every one of us is chosen, every one of us has a Christian vocation. One of the most pernicious, even dangerous, elements of the Church's understanding of ministry as it has evolved over the centuries is the idea that somehow "real" ministry is only done by priests who are formally ordained. In my early years in England, we actually spoke of ordination as "going into the Church," as if no one but clergy constituted the true Body of Christ! Of course, that was the tail end of that ancient English tradition whereby in noble families, the eldest son inherited the estate, the second son went into the army and the third son, went "into the Church." God forbid that you have more than three sons! When I was ordained 44 years ago, however, I was blessed to work with a progressive rector in an inner London parish who was fiercely committed to the principle that all believers are priests by virtue of their baptism. Gary Davies, indeed, taught boldly that the primary sacrament of ordination is baptism and that bishops, priests and deacons are called fundamentally to be catalysts for the ministries of all God's people. They are essentially imperfect icons and symbols of the truth that the laity (a word that comes from the Greek for "people") are called to vocations as sacred as those of the clergy. For example, we were all conditioned to believe that the priest "celebrates the Eucharist," but the truth is, in fact, that the priest presides on behalf of the people who are the true celebrants. We are taught that Deacons are called to a servanthood ministry, but in reality their primary role is to demonstrate that all of us are called to serve one another and the wider community. We are, of course, taught that the Bishop is the Overseer of the Church ("episcopos" literally means "overseer"), but the truth is that he or she is called to demonstrate that many are called in all our congregations to be decision-making leaders. I can think of multiple men and women here at St. John's who do that with great wisdom and authority. The result of Gary's work for years at St. Mary the Boltons parish in London was the formation of a truly empowered Body of Christ (very rare in the Church of England) that thrives to this day under lay leadership decades after Gary's untimely death. I might add that the result has been that the parish has weathered successfully several deadbeat rectors!!

I've said several times in sermons this past six months that our own baptism must be seen in the light of Our Lord's baptism in the River Jordan. The voice from heaven cries out as Jesus ascends from the waters, "This is my Beloved Son in Whom I am well pleased." The same voice cries to each of us: "This is my Beloved Daughter, this is my Beloved Son." That is the moment of your vocation, your calling, your ordination as a priest in the Body of Christ! Yes, YOU are God's Beloved with your own vocation unique to you! But how do we hear and acknowledge this call? The truth is that there are as many ways of perceiving God's call as there are Christians.

Some get "bashed over the head" like the Prophet Isaiah, who in the Temple at Jerusalem "saw the Lord, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the Temple...Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two their feet, and with two they flew...The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voice of those who called, and the house was filled with smoke." This is not a gentle kind of revelation, a sweet and heartwarming call to vocation – it's one of challenge and even terror. I remember so distinctly

my OT professor at Exeter University, Joshua Porter, telling us that the seraphs (and cherubs) in the OT are not the sweet little flying babies of Baroque art, but “large and fearsome Monsters!” They were, in fact, those massive Assyrian temple guardians with big beards and gigantic wings that you see in the British Museum. Perhaps your calling came out of a time of fearsome challenge in your life: the death of a loved one, a broken relationship, a serious health crisis. Like Isaiah you may have quaked before this challenge, but out of it, despite your weakness and feelings of unworthiness, you do encounter God. This may be why you are here today! And God in some way speaks to you as he did to Isaiah: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And you have responded, “Here I am, Lord, send me.” Think about it, who is God going to send, but the likes of you and me, despite our deep feelings of unworthiness?

Though the Apostle Paul did have his own “Damascus Road experience” where Christ revealed himself in a dramatic way, my sense is that for Paul vocation did not come easily because he was not an easy man to deal with. Truthfully, very few of us are people who are easy to deal with, including myself! Like Paul I struggle with the profound implications of vocation and though I’ve been a priest for almost 44 years, like Paul I continue to doubt and question why God has brought me to this place. Do you feel the same way? I suppose my own “Damascus Road” came when my mother observed when I was 15 that I had fallen in love with God and was running around exploring many different Christian traditions, from Southern Baptist to Greek Orthodox. She told a friend at work that I was such a weird kid and this woman (who, by the way sung tenor in the church choir) recommended that I try the church of my own family heritage, the Episcopal Church. I went and felt I was home at last and never left. Then my mother said, perhaps rather casually, “Have you thought of becoming a priest?” And, strangely, that stuck and I did become a priest just 8 years later. This was my “Damascus Road”. What’s yours? Who put the preposterous notion in your head that you should waste every Sunday of your life going to church instead of to the beach? And how about the struggle? Like Paul (like me) do you feel that everyone else gets to have that encounter with the Risen Lord, but not you? When Jesus finally appears to Paul, he writes that he was “last of all, as to one untimely born, for I am the least of the apostles.” I have all these 44 years struggled with this theme of unworthiness and have many times tried to run away from my calling, but God drags me back like a mother cat dragging her kitten by the scruff of the neck. This is Grace! This is unbounded Love!

Finally, we have the Gospel story of Jesus preaching from Simon Peter’s boat off the shore of the Sea of Galilee (Gennesaret). After he finishes, he tells Peter to “put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” Peter complains because they’d been hard at work all night without catching anything, yet he submits to Jesus’ request. And the result: “they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break.” Sometimes it seems that **we** labor in vain all the night long without catching a thing. Perhaps we’ve had a long “dark night of the soul,” a faith struggle that never seems to end, or we’ve labored in our calling, whatever it is, whether in church or in our life’s work, or in our relationships, with very little tangible results. Here I’m going to invoke a word that is not popular in our current culture and yet is key to understanding vocation: submission. The old expression, “Let go and let God,” may be trite, but it expresses a profound wisdom that is at the core of true Faith. It is the wisdom that underlies the Serenity Prayer of the Twelve Step Movement: “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” It is only when Peter submits to Jesus and paddles out to the middle of the lake that he receives the

blessing of the miraculous draught of fishes. Even then, Peter says, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.” And it is in the midst of his fear and profound sense of unworthiness that Jesus says, “Don’t be afraid; from now on you will be catching people (a fisher of men).” Here’s the call, Peter’s vocation, which like your own call may come out of a messy situation, one that seems hopeless, even desolate, without purpose, meaning or results. Just think of the rest of Peter’s life: he repeatedly loses faith denies he even knows Christ and yet he is the “rock” on which the Church is built.

It seems that in the midst of the most unlikely occasions in our lives we find ourselves, in the words of C.S. Lewis (actually stolen from the poet Wordsworth), “Surprised by Joy.” I would say that this deep sense of joy, which by the way, is not the same as “fun,” lies at the heart of the Christian faith experience. It is that understanding in the core of our being that we are loved and ultimately all is ok and that no matter what happens to us we are embraced and sustained by that love. And, most importantly, that Love has a purpose for us. When we submit to Joy, as we might say Peter does, we will see the results of our labors in work or ministry and often they will be nothing like we ever anticipated. The important thing to remember is that no matter who we are or where we are on the spiritual journey, every one of us is called by God for a purpose, every one of us has a vocation in the Body of Christ and, indeed, every one of us is a priest. We are all called, despite the challenges of our weakness, our lack of faith or motivation, to take common and ordinary bread, bless it, break it and distribute it for the healing of this broken world. Like Peter, we must choose to submit and row out into the deep and throw our net into what may seem to be dark and empty waters – then shall we be surprised by Joy and see an abundance that we never before dreamt of.