

12 January 2020

Isaiah 42.1-9

Matthew 13.13-17

We have asked the question, 'What are we for?'

Most of us want to find a place and a purpose in life.

We want to know that our lives are meaningful; that we are contributing something to the wider world.

But because we are people and not gadgets, answering that question can be complex and challenging. We are not here for a simple, functional purpose.

Life is multi-faceted and multi-layered. We want to know that all parts of our lives have meaning and purpose.

I am more than my job. I am more than a member of a family. I am more than the sum of my gifts and abilities.

And, because I am a person, I am forever changing. I grow, I mature, I learn. But more than that, the people around me and the world changes. So where I fit in this world is having to change all of the time. A whole number of re-evaluations of where we fit in the world, what we are here for, what we are meant to be doing with our lives are forced on us by events over which we have little control – redundancy, tragedy, relationship breakdown, ageing; or the opportunity for a new job, the development of a new relationship, the joy of becoming a parent or grandparent, a serendipitous encounter that changes our outlook on life ...

So, this morning I want to explore what it means to 'follow our calling'.

And I am making two unashamed assumptions in expressing it in this way.

1. I am assuming that we are not on our own in having to make sense of our lives – in having to carve out some grand purpose for our lives. I am assuming that we are engaged in this task in relationship with God.

Indeed I am assuming that we are doing it in response to God's call and claim on our lives. I am assuming that we have purpose in this world, because God graciously gives us purpose.

Now part of that is God's general call and claim on each of our lives. He has made us as human beings with a purpose in creation. That purpose is rich and extends into all areas of human life. But there is a common call and claim placed upon all of us, because God has made this world with a loving purpose, and he longs for us to find our place within that purpose.

2. I am also assuming that God calls each one of us as individuals

I am making the assumption that within this general claim on our lives, God also has some thoughts about how we as individuals might fit within his purposes.

There can be a tendency within the church (and indeed outside the church) to narrow down the use of the idea of 'calling'.

For someone who is going to be a 'minister' or a 'missionary', we would expect them to use the language of 'being called'. That sense of calling doesn't need to come in a dramatic experience, but we would expect them to be responding in some way to the prompting of God, rather than simply making a career choice – 'I think I could do that.'

Even in the secular world you hear the phrase of someone going into one of the caring professions – 'Of course, it's a vocation isn't it.' Vocation is another word for 'calling'. Not everyone would mean 'calling by God' ... but the secular equivalent of that – a kind of nebulous inner prompting that fits you to do that kind of work.

But all of this suggests that other life choices are not about responding to God's call.

Now I don't think that God is as narrow-minded as that. I think that God is as concerned about what is going on on the factory floor, or the construction site, or in the accountant's office or in the supermarket as he is in what is going on in the work of a minister, a nurse or a missionary.

I believe that God is calling, shaping and re-shaping our all of our lives continually. And for all of us we should be constantly alert to following our calling ... and aware that that particular calling, or the emphasis of our calling can change from time to time.

Now I also think that God treats us as adults/ as grown-ups. By which I mean that I think he involves us in creating meaning and purpose in our lives. Living life with God is not a kind of 'painting by numbers' exercise. God wants to make something with our lives by releasing us and our creativity to work with him and his greater creativity in weaving his purposes in the world.

It's not just one or two of us who are responding to God's call on our lives as individuals – it is all of us.

So let's look at this passage from Isaiah 42 which is all about appointment and call.

(1) "Here is my Servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen one in whom I delight."

(6) "I the Lord have called you in righteousness."

One of the debates which continues about this passage is who Isaiah had in mind when he spoke of the Servant.

Was it an individual, or was it the whole people of God?

And you can read it in both ways.

Some of the passage seems to relate to the calling of a particular individual.

"He will not shout or cry out,
or raise his voice in the streets."

This sounds like a particular calling for a particular time.

But other portions seems to best fit the whole nation:

"I will make you to be a covenant for the people,
and light for the Gentiles."

This is not a call for a particular time and place, but for all times.

And, of course, reading this passage as a Christian community we cannot but see Jesus exemplifying this call in his own life.

And indeed the voice of God at Jesus' baptism, "This is my Son, whom I love. With him I am well pleased." These words seem to echo the words addressed to the Servant:

“Here is my chosen one, in whom I delight. I will put my Spirit on him ...”

What can we glean from this passage about what it might mean to follow God’s calling on our lives?

1. God calls us in small places to work for big things.

Whatever the particular surroundings and circumstances of our lives,

Whatever our abilities and opportunities,

Whatever restrictions we face in life,

God’s call on our lives forces us to lift our eyes to see a further horizon.

Look at the big picture that this servant is called to work for:

(1) He will bring justice to the nations

(3, 4) In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth.

(6, 7) I will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles ... to free captives from prison.

2. God calls us to learn his counter-intuitive ways

God’s ways of working, and the ways in which God expects us to respond to his call are often counter-intuitive.

He has this huge agenda for the Servant, and yet he says

“He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets.

A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out.”

This particular servant is called to make a difference ... but not to go about it with a fanfare of trumpets or by forcing his ways on others.

Indeed there is to be a gentleness and a care for those he is among. No potential is to be despised or broken.

We see Jesus working in this counter-intuitive way throughout his ministry, and it is epitomised in his baptism.

John instinctively believes that this is the wrong way around, when Jesus comes to ask for baptism. John believes that he needs Jesus' baptism of the Spirit more than Jesus needs his baptism of water.

But Jesus knows deeply that he is being called to live in this counter-intuitive world of God's kingdom in order to come alongside the lost and the poor and the struggling in order to create a new community of God's people.

Sometimes that will mean not fully understanding how God is using us in the world. Because God works in counter-intuitive ways, it means sometimes that we are unsure how God can be using us, and where or how we fit in.

3. When responding to God's call, our focus should remain on God and not on us.

God wants to use our gifts and opportunities and personalities, but he doesn't call us because of them.

The focus in this passage is not on the servant, and the servant's gifts, talents, personality and opportunities, but on God throughout.

This is what God says that he will do -

- whom I uphold (1)
- in whom I delight (1)
- I will put my Spirit on him (1)
- I have called you in righteousness (6)
- I will take hold of your hand (6)
- I will keep you (6) (or I created you and appointed you)
- I will make you
 - a covenant for the people
 - a light for the Gentiles

If we are following our calling, then it is all about what God can and will do in us and through us.

God has called us ...

Will you follow?