

God's Call - Colleen Clayton – Sunday 31st January 2010

Readings: Jeremiah 1. 4-10, Psalm 71, 1-6, 1 Corinthians 13. 1-13, Luke 4. 21-30

The first reading we heard today, the reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, tells us the story of the call of Jeremiah the prophet. Right from the moment of his call, Jeremiah struggles with God. The book that bears his name contains many stories of the ways in which he suffered for doing God's will. He laments at some length about his struggles to continue to serve God in the face of persecution and he asks God to hurry up and give a fair deal - reward to those who serve God, punishment to those who disobey.

When God calls him, Jeremiah says, effectively, "Oh, come on God I'm only a kid, I'm not up to this" and God replies, "Don't use the 'I'm too young' argument with me, I chose you before you were born! Now come on. I appoint you to do this so I will give you the words and I will deliver you." So, despite his initial reluctance and his ongoing struggles, Jeremiah does choose to serve God as a prophet all through his life. In fact, for me, it is this choice to serve, eyes wide open, knowing it is going to be tough that speaks to me of his love and faithfulness to God. So this reading gives us a reluctant man, who feels ill-equipped being strengthened and enabled by the love of God to fulfill the call God has for him.

The story from today's Gospel is an interesting one to juxtapose with the story of Jeremiah's reluctant acceptance of his calling. At the point where the Gospel reading begins, Jesus' public ministry has just begun. After being tempted in the wilderness, he has returned to Galilee, "filled with the power of the spirit". He has begun to teach in the synagogues and everyone is praising him. Then, he comes to Nazareth, where he grew up and on the Sabbath he goes into the synagogue and when he stands up to read, he is given the scroll of the prophet Isaiah which says,

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

When he finishes reading he announces that, "*Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*" Luke tells us that even at that point everyone was amazed at Jesus' gracious words but then, it's as if they pause and have another think and they start asking themselves, "Is not this Joseph's son?" It seems that in the very first moment, the truth of Jesus' words and the power of the Spirit that is in him touch them but then they choose to discount him. They bring him back down to size by saying in effect, "You can't fool us,

we know who you are. You are only the carpenter's son." In response Jesus reminds them of other times when God's people have chosen to reject God's prophets and God's gifts have gone instead to outsiders who could accept them. The people are so angered by this that they drive him out of town with the intention of throwing him off a cliff.

For me, this story, set next to the story of Jeremiah reminds me that although we first need to find and respond to God's call to us, even when God is with us, equipping and sending us, we may come to places where what we offer is not honoured. In fact, even if we come with the power of Jesus we might find that all we can evoke is anger. The people of Nazareth presumably would have been happy with a famous Jesus who brought glory to their town but did not rock the boat. However, his powerful ministry threatened and scared them. They wanted to keep control of things and they did that by choosing only to acknowledge a very small part of who he was. They chose to ignore his words of power and truth and see him only as the carpenter's son.

So as I sat with these readings I began to wonder about how these things show up in my life. What excuses do I use to avoid or reject God's call? Do I, like Jeremiah, tell God I'm not ready to do as he asks – not old enough, or wise enough or educated enough. After all, God's call might require me to step out in faith that God will equip me and perhaps I don't choose to trust God enough to take that step. Or perhaps, I am more like the people of Nazareth, rejecting and angry when I see others around me responding to God's call. Perhaps I initially recognize God at work in them but then I choose to reject what is happening because it threatens or scares me. I don't think I am the only person who can feel uncomfortable to see others reaching their potential, particularly if that potential challenges my way of believing and of being. I think a fear of potential can be found in both individuals and in groups like our parish. There is often a large gap between what we are comfortable to consider as part of God's plan and the amazing reality of God's plan. I think the Gospel reading today warns us that we have a choice to make. We can either choose to look for the signs of God at work amongst us or we can choose to dismiss God's work through our negativity, our complacency or our contempt of the familiar.

So, if we are to choose well, if we are to open ourselves to God so that we achieve the potential that God plans for us, how are we to do it? Of course the answer is going to be through love! Paul makes this completely clear. If we don't love, it doesn't matter what else we do. Love is what brings potential to fruition. Everything else will eventually come to an end, run out of steam, but love will still be there. Love is the reason to serve God, the means by which we serve God and the fruit of serving God; the self-giving love that is expressed as patience, kindness, truthfulness, forbearance, belief, hope and endurance. For each of us to respond to God's call to us as individuals and as a parish, we

need to practice love. For each of us to empower the call of others and of our parish, we need to practice love. It is the daily commitment to loving God, ourselves and each other that will enable us to respond to our own individual callings and to see and encourage the callings of those around us. It is the practice of love that will fulfill our potential. It is through the work of love that we will begin, as Paul says, to see God face to face.

And there is another part of the readings that sheds some light on how we are to love each other into our potential. It is the imagery of God's anointing presence and involvement in our human lives, even from before birth.

God tells Jeremiah,

"Before you were formed in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you."

The Psalmist praises God saying,

"Upon you have I leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother's womb."

The image of a baby, particularly an unborn baby, is of a creature who is both vulnerable and in need of protection but also full of miraculous potential. The unborn baby is cradled in the womb, safe and with all its needs met so that it can grow to a point where it is ready to be born and begin life in the world. After its birth, the task of those caring for a baby is to continue to keep it safe, to nurture it and to empower it so that it can grow and fulfill its potential as a human being. Particularly in this season of Epiphany we need to remind ourselves that God's love itself was born as a human baby – needing protection, full of potential. But Epiphany also challenges us to remember that the journey from vulnerability into full potential is a surprising one. God's plan of redemption is revealed in startling ways to unexpected people. God's call to us can sound jarring to our ears and God's requests of us can cause us to feel offended. And when we are surprised, jarred, offended, Epiphany calls us to take a second look.

Of course protecting and empowering are tricky things to balance. As a baby grows, its need of our protection and its need to be empowered to live independently change. For us to do our job of growing a baby to full adulthood we must love and protect it but also help it to grow to independent maturity.

This is true of babies and perhaps of parishes too. We are constantly engaged in change and growth and we need to find ways to both protect what is precious and vulnerable within us but also to move forwards and not turn back to childish habits that we have outgrown.

Over the years our parish has been nurtured and encouraged to grow in love for God, for ourselves and for one another. As people and priests come and go, the love that we

practise together remains a part of who we are. God is constantly calling us and inviting us to respond - to take the next step forward and grow, to look at each other with eyes willing to see where God is at work in us and ready to take the challenge to see things differently.

God has loved this parish since it was first formed. God has loved each one of us since before we were born. God has called to each one of us over the years and has sent us people who have empowered and equipped us. God gives us the freedom to choose what we will do with all that we have learnt so far. I pray that we will allow ourselves to be surprised by God's ongoing self-revelation and that above all we will practice love because whatever else we choose, only our love will last.

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