

Sermon at St John's on Sunday 25th August 2019

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit Amen

'God's call is mysterious; it comes in the darkness of faith. It is so fine, so subtle, that it is only with the deepest silence within us that we can hear it. And yet nothing is so decisive and over-powering for a person on this earth, nothing surer or stronger... This call is uninterrupted: God is always calling us! But there are distinctive moments in this call of his, moments which leave a permanent mark on us – moments which we never forget.' (*Words of Carlo Carretto, of the Little Brothers of Jesus*)

Today's Old Testament reading presents us with the dramatic and powerful story of the call of Jeremiah, the prophet.

It is a story of God's awesome power... his personal call on our lives... and **our** journey from fear and reluctance, **into** daring to trust God, and a willingness – whatever our fears or sense of inadequacy – to give it a go and walk with Him, in order to discover God's plan for our lives.

I wonder where you are in that story, which can be read not only as the real-life story of one of the great prophets of the Old Testament, but also as a personification of the whole vocation of the People of God (the Church), in seeking to fulfil God's hidden purposes in creation?

I wonder if - like Jeremiah - you don't feel old enough or important enough to be given something so vital to do? Or perhaps, like some of the other prophets, you feel unworthy, because you're only too aware of your imperfections. Or you simply struggle to hear in the first place, let alone believe that you could have a place in God's plans, so busy and distracted are you with day-to-day survival.

And if you're anything like me, it can feel so much more interesting and attractive, as Jonah did, to head off in the opposite direction, as soon as you begin to hear the whisper of God, disrupting your well-honed plans! So terrified are we, initially, by the presence of God, that we almost instinctively journey as far away from God as we can, in order to make the point that 'actually, I don't need you God – I'm quite alright as I am; thank you very much!' But are we?

So let's look at the story of Jeremiah, and see what it might have to say to us – in terms of God's call of each one of us, and our response in faith... as we seek to develop our gifts, and become the unique persons whom God has called each of us to be, before even we were born.

'Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you..." '

The first thing that hits us from the passage is the awesomeness of God, who is ever so real, and who calls each one of us personally; not just prophets and saints, or Christian leaders. 'Before you were formed in the womb I knew you.' It's mind-blowing, if you stop to think about it, isn't it? That God, the creator, know us from eternity, and calls out to us, his beloved children, each with an identity and a purpose in God. It's not that the future is all mapped out, and we're kind of on auto pilot; or even that there's only one right or wrong course. Rather like a growing tree or germinating seed each is implanted with the divine DNA, and with a distinctive part to play in God's creation. As Psalm 139 puts it, 'I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.'

Secondly, we are struck – and reassured – by the fact that Jeremiah, like us, instinctively finds all kinds of reasons not to respond to God's personal call and invitation to co-operate with Him. In Jeremiah's case it is his age and general sense of unworthiness, and we've already rehearsed what some of our instinctive reactions might be.

It's fascinating, if you read the call of the prophets in the Old Testament generally, to notice the kinds of pattern that seems to emerge, and the many reasons they cite for not obeying God. Isaiah says that he has unclean lips – or to put it colloquially, he's too practised in uttering four letter words! Ezekiel is so bowled over he falls on his face in humility and shame. But the best of all, to me, is Moses, who keeps on and on – at the Burning Bush – telling God all the reasons why God has got the wrong man: He is slow of speech, he doesn't know God's name, he's convinced the people will not listen to him or take him seriously. And in many ways this impassioned dialogue with God, which is all too real and human, helps us, because it shows us that our struggle is legitimate. God doesn't expect us to get it overnight; it does take time to get the message and dare to cooperate with God. We know only too well the many barriers we face, today, in seeking to listen to God, let alone to dare to follow Him. But if St Paul could get God so utterly wrong, before being dazzled by his presence, and turning round to face in the right direction, there is hope for us all.

Notice then, thirdly, in the face of Jeremiah's protestations, how God responds and provides reassurance to him, as God does to all the prophets – and indeed to each of us, in our journey, as we tune in to hear his word. 'Do not be afraid... for I am with you to deliver you', God says to Jeremiah, and (since speaking was his primary calling) 'Now I have put my words in your mouth'. So God understands our reluctance, but he also speaks to reassure and comfort us, to remind us that in Him we have all the resources we need, to follow Him and respond with our whole being.

And this is where it's so vital that we learn to be still, to 'be' as well as 'do'; to take time to relax, to reflect, and abide in God; to put down deep roots in prayer and worship and meditation on the

scriptures, in order that we are truly open to hearing what God is actually saying to us, at any particular point in our lives. For God is always speaking to us, but we need to clear space to hear His word of encouragement and affirmation of us. And we, as a church, also need to take time – at the root of our mission and activity – to be with God, to listen to him, to discern what he wants us to do. As Hebrews says, we are indeed surrounded by the angels of God and the whole company of heaven, and we're challenged – as children of light – not to refuse the one who is speaking to us, Jesus, but humbly to obey His will.

So, finally, having been called by God, having expressed his own unworthiness; having been encouraged by God's promise and provision for him; Jeremiah finally dares to respond and to take up the challenge of his prophetic calling. And in what follows, through the entire Book of Jeremiah, we see the transforming impact of God's word, speaking through him: 'to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.'

We too, each in our own way, are called to build and to plant, God's new future... to discover the part that we must play, both individually and corporately; to witness to Christ, to reveal his love to others, to discover our own particular gifts, to serve God's kingdom, and to build community, in a world of suffocating loneliness and isolation.

As Bishop John Pritchard has written of this vocational journey of growing into the fullness of faith and love,

'Christian maturity is an unfinished life-long task... essential if we are to survive the battering of 21st Century life. The process is exciting and full of discovery... to be alive is to be a learner [and a disciple].'

And in Jesus, who heals on the Sabbath and upsets the accepted order of things, we see the shape of a life fully directed to God, and standing against the principalities and powers of darkness, which maim and inhibit true life, in all its fullness. He is the pattern of our calling, our 'yes' to God, our journey of obedience, of seeking – like Jeremiah – to grow into the fullness of all that God, in his loving mercy, calls each one of us to be + do.

So may we take courage to be attentive to God's call, throughout our lives; may we take time to listen to God, and to hear the assurance of His presence with us, whatever our uncertainties; and may we, however long it takes, dare to respond, sharing together in the task of planting and growing his kingdom in the world.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit Amen