

Sermon for Matins – August 22nd 2021

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Readings:

Exodus 4:27-5:1

Hebrews 13:16-21

Main point: God never calls us to serve in isolation. It is always in partnership, in relationship. Important not to isolate biblical characters but to see them in context. Gives us encouragement to reflect on our own relationships and partnerships in the gospel.

‘No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main’, wrote John Donne 400 years ago. I find myself returning time and time again to Donne’s meditation – not just because of its beauty and simplicity, but because of its truth. Donne reveals to us the lie of self sufficiency, the lie of autonomy, and the reminder of the grace bestowed upon us by God through our being part of something greater, being ‘a piece’, ‘a part’.

But it’s a complicated thing isn’t it, making sense of our place and our purpose in relation to ourselves and others. One of the bits of terminology that I have found so challenging across the pandemic has been the word ‘self isolation’. Challenging because it resonates with deep sadnesses in our society – of loneliness, of segregation and separation, and of course of the complete cult of self, where we knowingly and deliberately detach ourselves from others by our choosing of certain values or lifestyle decisions. And yet ‘self isolation’ has been paradoxically a concept which has reminded us of our being a part of something bigger, a necessary step to withdraw for the sake of others, for the wellbeing of the vulnerable and our wider community. Those who have had to self isolate have had the experience of being able to empathise with the sick and housebound, have had to depend on the support of others to provide for their needs, have been faced perhaps with more time to sit and dwell on their own lives and circumstances such that they have decided to make significant changes. Strangely, it has shown us again the fallacy that Donne identifies – that actually we are not happy on being isolated as an island entire of itself. Whatever our personality types, we are all made for connection, for relationship, for interdependence.

Our readings today remind us that this is never more true than in the case of God’s call on our lives. It can be very easy I think to isolate the characters we find in scripture, and indeed when I was teaching in secondary schools I used to come across whole schemes of learning on individual Bible characters. It alarmed me that children would come out of lessons thinking that the whole narrative of scripture rested upon a few individual lives – perhaps Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus, and Paul. Notwithstanding the issues of gender misrepresentation, there are massive issues with seeing these characters in isolation! No one person in scripture has a story to tell which is not connected with the lives and stories of others. The others may be fleeting in their references, but they are absolutely there – and their witness and work makes the difference.

In our reading from Exodus, we remember that Moses’s journey to accepting God’s call was far from straightforward, and it is to his brother Aaron that he turns for wisdom and encouragement. Aaron then, at this point in the story, becomes the driving force, the prophet whom Moses presents to Pharaoh and so begins the process of negotiating for the release of the Israelites. I wonder if popular imagination seeks to marginalise these other characters as a way of emphasising the greatness of the famous characters? But if we look closely we see Moses here as extremely weak, extremely vulnerable, extremely unsure. It is only by the strength of Aaron’s fluency and confidence in speaking that the initial meeting with Pharaoh ever takes place. The Lord doesn’t just speak to Moses, it is through his revelation to Aaron that Moses is met in the wilderness, and encouraged sufficiently to be

able to begin the daunting task of negotiating the release of the people of Israel from the hands of Pharaoh. It is true that Aaron, like Miriam, Jethro, Zipporah and so many other characters in the story of the Exodus, doesn't continue to maintain such a central role as Moses, and yet I think it's fair to argue that the way God works to liberate His people happens because of the faithfulness of all of these people, and many more besides. The witness of scripture is always to faithfulness, collaboration, and partnership.

Likewise the language of our reading from the letter to the Hebrews must not be misread as an individual exhortation, but rather a collective encouragement and exhortation from one group to another. Paul is another example of an apostle who we isolate and celebrate as a hero of the faith, and yet is consistently humble about acknowledging his utter dependency, even from the moment of his conversion, on the wisdom, teaching, hospitality, encouragement and service of so many others. Everytime we hear the word 'your' we must hear it in the 2nd person plural in which it was written. This is not simply a letter to an individual church leader, but is addressed to the community of faith, on the assumption that ALL are involved in leadership, all are involved in the sharing of the ministry.

When I was preparing to be ordained as a deacon and was reading through the ordinal, the text of the ordination service, I was heartened by just how much of it was written in communal language, not individual. In order for a person to be ordained, others have to testify to how they have seen God's call in this person's life. And the ordinand themselves, in their promises they make, have to commit to 'working with' others, 'sharing in' the ministry, leading and teaching and accompanying. There is really very little in the ordination service which isn't a plural 'you', and there is wonderfully no sense of hierarchy of priest and people – there is just the acknowledgment of the diversity of gifts and the call to work collaboratively.

My encouragement to you this morning is to prayerfully discern your own ongoing sense of calling not in any form of self isolation, but rather through the partnerships, friendships, and collaborations of which you are already a part. For as the body of Christ, and not as islands, each part and piece is precious, and valuable and significant and needed. Today is my last day serving you before I begin my period of maternity leave, and I leave with joyful thanksgiving to God for the privilege of sharing in ministry with you, and praying for your ongoing sense of discernment as a community to how we can continue to serve this parish at this time, for the sake of the glorious gospel of Christ.

Amen.