

2nd Sunday of Epiphany, Eucharist

Isaiah 49:1-7, 1 Corinthians 1:1-9, John 1:29-42

Mother Emma

Every one of our readings this morning – including the psalm – touches on the theme of calling or vocation. Although the word is often used in the context of a priestly vocation, every one of us is called in a particular way by God to serve him as his disciple.

One of the three pillars we have identified as the core of our new Mission Action Plan is that of “Discipleship”. But what does discipleship look like today?

Our Plan suggests ways in which, as a community, we might deepen our prayer life, spirituality and knowledge of the faith, in order to be able to draw others to Christ. Yet how do we discern and respond to God’s call to us as individuals?

We may look somewhat nervously at the best-known examples of disciples given to us in the Bible, among them the stories from our readings today. The suffering servant is a figure described by the prophet Isaiah, who in Christian theology, is often thought to be a foreshadowing of Christ himself. He tells us that, “The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother’s womb, he named me.” God has called him to the not insignificant task of restoring Israel to righteousness, and we are told elsewhere in Isaiah that he suffers torture and hatred as a result. Paul, likewise, encountered both opposition and violence in following God’s call.

So we might ask ourselves, are we being called, like John the Baptist or the disciples called by Jesus in our Gospel today, to give up our livelihoods and families, and to follow wherever we sense God is leading us, in spite of the dangers of hatred and persecution?

There are those for whom God’s calling may involve some of these elements, and, if we believe that this is not our own calling, we can offer them our prayers, our support and our admiration. But we tend to forget, when we read the stories in the Bible, quite how many people with perfectly “ordinary” lives also feature in the Gospels as disciples of Jesus, who supported his ministry and then his Church.

Mary, Martha and Lazarus are amongst his dearest friends who used their home, food and friendship to entertain and support Jesus and his disciples on many occasions.

The women who stood lovingly at the foot of Jesus’ Cross, and who came to anoint his body in spite of all the dangers, also do not appear to have been itinerant preachers, but to have been ordinary members of society and we are told that one of them was the wife of Herod’s steward – a figure of the Establishment.

We hear countless stories of Jesus attending dinners and banquets with people who presumably supported and admired him, but who were not being asked to walk away from their normal lives, but rather to transform them by using what they had been given in the service of the Lord.

And there are further examples of this kind of domestic follower in the letters of Paul, who often stayed, ate and preached in the houses of fellow Christians, whom, as we heard in our reading today, he considered to have been just as much called by the Lord as he was himself.

Our calling may well not involve wearing sandwich boards and proclaiming the coming of the Kingdom, or knocking on people’s doors to discuss the Bible and sin, both of which might be done by a modern version of John the Baptist, described in our first reading. God may also not require us to leave our homes and families and everything known to us, and to travel to distant lands to serve him. But this does not mean that he does not have a plan for each one of us, and that every Christian is called to serve him in their own particular way.

Perhaps he is calling us to live the lives we already live, to maintain our friendships and relationships and the communities of which we are a part, but *within* all of that, to confess unashamedly in word and in deed that we are his disciples.

Can we simply be bold enough to let those around us see that we are Christians and churchgoers, that faith in God is an essential part of our lives which influences our moral and ethical decisions, steering us away from exploitation and dishonesty and greed, and towards hospitality, compassion, truth and integrity? Can we tell others that the story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus allows us to hope and trust that one day we too may rest in peace and rise in glory? This kind of witness – to the centrality of Christ and of his teaching in our everyday lives – IS discipleship.

If our faith is clearly manifested in our lives, through a humble self-discipline, generous love of others and a belief in the power of prayer, it will encourage others to explore it further. By our words and actions, by our sense of hope and trust, we can draw others to God, just as the disciples were called to do.

And if this feels a hard task – if we are tempted to think that our religion is a private matter between ourselves and God – we need only look once more at our readings to see that sharing, or demonstrating clearly in our lives our experience of God and the tenets of our faith is part of the calling of every Christian. As the psalmist sang, “He hath put a new song in my mouth ... Many shall see it and fear; and shall put their trust in the Lord.

The readings also emphasise that God gives us the *strength* to live out our calling from him. The suffering servant believes, “God has become my strength”, and Paul encourages the Corinthians with the thought that “He will also strengthen you to the end.”

As we place our trust in God’s strength, so the visible manifestation of our faith will shine out through our lives, into the lives of others. And we can encourage them, as Jesus said to Andrew and Simon Peter when they began to ask questions of him: “Come and see.”

Amen.