

10th April 2016
Sermon by Rev Elizabeth Richardson
EASTER 3C, 10.30am Worship Service

What do we understand by the word “Call” when we use it in the religious sense? It usually means that God has spoken to an individual in some way and given them a particular task to do. We speak of being called to ministry. Being called to serve people in need or some other calling.

Both readings this morning talk of God’s call to service. And both readings are very familiar to all who have spent time in the church.

In each case the men had previously failed Jesus in some way. Peter of course had denied knowing Jesus three times in the hours after Jesus’ arrest. It was a dangerous time for anyone to be a friend of Jesus and Peter was saving his own skin.

Jesus, along with Peter and the other disciples were all faithful Jews but Jesus had seen the way of life that God wanted them all to live and which so many were not living. A lot of what he said during his ministry had already been said and reported in the scriptures we know as the Old Testament. But people had failed to follow God’s wishes and finally God had sent his Son, Jesus to bring the message. Then, many refused to accept what Jesus said because it didn’t fit in with their ideas of God and the way they wanted to live. Vested interests of one sort or another are always a challenge to living a Godly, moral life.

As we heard with the children, Peter had returned to his fishing trade on the Sea of Galilee. Then Jesus appeared. Now, Jesus’ was not just there to show that he had risen. He was clearly there to give Peter an assignment – one in broad terms for the rest of his life. And that was to continue the work that Jesus had done during his ministry. We know from the book of Acts, that Peter had difficulties from time to time but he stuck at it and was a great leader of the early church as it eventually separated from mainstream Judaism. You may remember one of the early matters he had to come to terms with was the idea that he could have table fellowship with Gentiles, something strict Jews never did.

Paul was also a faithful Jew. A learned Jew. A Jew who was upset at what he saw as heresy on the part of Jesus and so had been working to stop it. He wasn’t the only one to have this understanding, even of those who had been following Jesus. Many wanted to keep the Jewish faith pure and could not believe that God would accept outsiders unless they converted to Judaism.

Now, we know that Israel had many Gentiles living in it. To start with, it was part of the Roman Empire and so there were people of many cultures there. Some of those Gentiles had become fascinated with Judaism and some of those learnt of what Jesus taught and formed small groups of followers. This is where the whole thing started to become difficult. Should the Gentile followers of Jesus also become Jews? After all, Jesus and all his disciples had been Jews. Many of the early Christian leaders thought they should and tried to force the issue by telling them to join or get out of Jerusalem. So groups left Jerusalem and settled in other towns and countries. As the Australian theologian William Loader says, this just exacerbated the problem because those groups maintained their following of Jesus’ teachings and attracted others to this way of life in the new towns to which they went.

This is where Paul came in. He was a strict Jew who believed that the Gentiles who followed Jesus' teachings should become Jews. The men should be circumcised. All should adopt the kosher food laws etc. Paul had always understood that the long term plan of God was that Gentiles would be gathered into the Jewish tradition and law. He went on a mission to gather up all those Gentiles who were followers of Jesus and force them to become Jews. And so he set off to Damascus to deal with the Gentile followers of Jesus there. And then on the way, God spoke to him.

Now, almost all of my Bibles have a heading at this point in Acts to say "the conversion of Saul/Paul". I grew up knowing the story as the conversion of Paul. But leading theologians, such as Krister Stendahl, have said that it would be more accurate to name it a call. After all, there was no separate Christian church at that time. Rather it was a group within Judaism. Paul was a faithful devout Jew and remained so all his life. In some of his letters he spells out what a faithful Jew he was. So he wasn't changing his religion. He was changing his understanding of how his lifelong religion should be lived. We can think of John Wesley who was and remained for his entire life, an ordained Anglican priest. He had not intended to start a new denomination but rather to reform the Anglican church. It was just that his followers eventually had to split away.

What Paul was called to by God was a mission to the Gentiles. This was a complete turning around of his understanding of what he should be doing for God. In Galatians, Paul says that he had been set apart by God for this mission while he was in his mother's womb. This was a major change for Paul. He'd been doing everything he could to suppress the idea that Gentiles could be followers of Jesus and then he had to change and realize that Jesus had been doing God's will when he included non Jews and allowed them to keep their own social ways.

Paul went on to devote his life and passion to taking Jesus' message to the Gentiles in various parts of the Roman Empire.

Both Peter and Paul died the death of a martyr. Most who follow the call of God to a special mission do not die as martyrs. But all can find that there are sacrifices to be made in order to keep faith with God. Other family members may not understand that we have to put God's wishes first. There may be difficulties at work or in social groups. That is part of the price one pays.

As we look around our society today, we see that many people are uncertain of the way they should live because they don't know God. We may be upset at the lack of thought for others on the part of many people. We are upset at the waste generated in our throw away society. We are upset at the short term thinking of many, which then leads to destruction of our natural world. People are killed when builders cut corners like the recent road collapse in India. Very wealthy people find ways (technically legal) to avoid paying taxes and thus fail to pay their share for the services we all depend on such as health and education and defence. God calls people to behave ethically and with consideration for others and for our God's creation. God calls us all to follow the way of life which Jesus modelled. Then God also calls some to special missions.

When we are called by God we either accept or reject that call. Some find it too hard. But if we do accept the call, then we have to live our lives in accordance with that calling. Amen.

Rev Elizabeth Richardson