

CALLED TO SERVE

EPIPHANY 2A

15.01.17 Wesley

Isaiah 49:1-7; 1 Corinthians 1: 1-9; John 1: 29-34 10.30am Service

Prayer: Gracious God, through Christ you have called us to be disciples, and you have promised to nurture and support us in our witness in word and deed. Help us now as we attend to your word for us today and may my word as spoken and as heard convey the Gospel with integrity and love. Amen.

Alan Tongue is a retired rugby league footballer. He played for the Canberra Raiders for his whole career, from 2000 to 2011, and was Captain from 2007 to 2011. During this period he was named the Rugby League Players Association Education and Wellbeing Player of the Year in 2008. Since retiring as a player he has thrown himself into helping others. He has developed programs teaching young people to make positive life choices, tackling domestic violence, and helping homeless people.

Just recently he was named the 2017 Australian of the Year for the Australian Capital Territory. Following that, the National Museum of Australia invited him and other Awardees to provide some significant items for display.

He provided three. The first was a bronzed football boot, which recognised the significant part that football had played in his life so far. He said: "The NRL allowed me to pursue a dream of playing rugby league but also provided me with support through work and study. The lessons I learned through playing and captaining have had a huge influence on the way I develop and implement programs in the community."

The second item was white ribbon. He said: "The white ribbon connects to my 'Stop, Think, Say No to Family Violence' program I deliver in high schools across Canberra to year 9 and 10 students. It focuses on respectful relationships and the need to create a safe, supportive, caring environment that provides equal opportunities for men and women'.

He third item was a small wooden cross. He said "I grew up in a strong Christian family and faith is important in the way I approach life. I

purchased the wooden cross many years ago and it comes with me on my travels as a reminder of my core values and the importance of giving back to the community’.

I guess Alan would say that he is trying to take seriously his response to God’s call to him. And that is surely an issue which is significant for all people who profess faith in Jesus Christ. It’s about recognising that our life in Christ is not simply a matter us taking the initiative in how we live, but trying to discern God’s call to us, and responding in a way consistent with the life of Jesus.

It seems to me that even as we sit here in church, worshipping God, following Jesus, that we are here because we have been called. It was all God’s idea before ours. And in this Christian season of Epiphany, we are reminded that even as Jesus is the light of the world, we are called to be his lights in the world.

It is therefore appropriate that our first lesson today is from the prophet Isaiah, the prophet that Jesus quotes more than any other. It’s appropriate because we can resonate with the prophet’s words when he said of himself “The Lord called me ..called my name saying to me, ‘You are my servant Israel, in whom I show my glory.’

We are here because we have been called.

I occasionally come across televangelists who “ply their trade” [can I say that?] in the early hours of morning. I have noticed that often they invite their viewers to view God as the answer to all of their problems. The spiel goes like this “What need do you have that God can meet? Is it health, financial, emotional, work related or personal relationships? No problem. Take them to the Lord and he will provide”. There usually follows an invitation to show your faith by financially supporting that particular ministry, with the assurance that God would bless you even more richly.

But this is not the way of the Christian faith. The Gospel is not a story about how Jesus came to meet our needs, but rather a story about how Jesus summons us to work with him and on his behalf in saving the world!

If we look at today's Gospel reading we find Jesus calling ordinary people to be his disciples. Whatever work Jesus wants to do; he doesn't do that work alone. He calls others to help him, people like us. And so the major reason that we gather each Sunday to worship, to learn from Jesus, sing songs for him, and see his way more clearly, is so that we might be better equipped to serve him.

Which takes us back to the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah certainly has a clear sense of God's call to him:

"The Lord called me before my birth, called my name when I was in my mother's womb".

Isaiah then outlines the gifts God has given him and the works that God wants him to do:

"He made my mouth like a sharp sword. He made me a sharpened arrow..saying to me "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I show my glory."

Isaiah is given a mouth to speak up for God, to preach and proclaim the message of God. Through his mouth, God will show forth to the world God's glory.

And this is not just a word for preachers. It is a word for all of us in the sense that wherever we are, or serve, we speak up for God. Martin Luther wrote that the preacher preaches in the church on Sunday so that the people of God can preach in the world the rest of the week.

Our mouths become like a sharp sword, as we speak up in the context of the world's darkness. And we become a sharpened arrow that goes directly to change someone's heart, to speak some word of comfort in a tough situation, to offer encouragement amid someone's sadness. It's as simple, and as challenging, as that!

When I worked as a Probation and Parole Officer in Dubbo a few years ago I was charged with delivering a program for Domestic Abuse Offenders. What the program endeavoured to do was to help the participants, mainly young adult males, genuinely acknowledge and own their abusive behaviour, and then adopt positive strategies to address it. Now research has showed that domestic abusers often reflect behaviour which has been modelled to them in their formative years. So in one session the group is asked to identify what their core beliefs were, that is, beliefs which were so deeply embedded in their psyche that they couldn't really recall when they were formed.

I introduced the group to 5 core beliefs. They were: I'm unlovable, I'm worthless, I'm not good enough, I'm powerless, and I'm a failure. When I asked whether any of the group identified with one or other of these core beliefs, the hands always shot up. Some said that they lived with the whole 5, and that these beliefs had been around for as long as they could remember.

When I invited group members to talk about their experiences they often became quite emotional. I sensed that some really did see a connection between the way they were treated as children and the way they treated their own partners and families. But the problem was that this exercise was the last activity for the program that evening. I was supposed to simply acknowledge the participants input and send them home. I recall saying to myself in one of the early programs – I can't do this – sending them home in their misery. So I had a brainwave. I invited the group to consider the flip side of these core beliefs, that is: I am loveable, I have worth, I have potential for good, I can make positive decisions, I can know success. I recall saying "What difference would this make in your life if you lived with these core beliefs? And they came back: "Everything!" I said, "Well, how do you get there?" Silence. And one said, "by talking with our counsellors and Probation and Parole Officers, people like you."

You know the mood of the group inevitably changed after that. And as time passed I saw many of these young men move on towards living in a positive, law abiding way. As I reflect on this now, I really believe that this was for me an experience of speaking a word like a sharpened arrow, which, by God's

grace, touched many a human heart. And that was in the context of a gathering of young men, not a faithful congregation. It can be done.

When we return to the reading from Isaiah we encounter a challenge, both for Isaiah and for us. He writes “But I said, I have wearied myself in vain. I have used up my strength for nothing.”

Right after Isaiah’s stirring words about his call from God he speaks words of disillusionment and despair.

Now just imagine if you were the prophet, talking about your call from God, celebrating the gifts God had given you, and the assignments laid out for you, would you have then written about having a sense of failure?

How is it that the one who is called by God, gifted by God and commissioned to do God’s work, should also feel that it was all for nothing? That the deeds done in God’s name were deeds done in vain?

I have a hunch that some of you know exactly Isaiah means. In fact, when we discern the call of God in our lives and endeavour to respond, then at some point on the journey ahead we will inevitably experience struggle, disillusionment and even outright failure. The higher the call, the greater the opportunity for failure. Remember where Jesus loving and caring ministry took him!

But back to the reading, and there we find that despair and failure are not the last words. Though the prophet is honest about his sense of disappointment he then proclaims:

“Nevertheless....surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward is with my God.”

Our call, our baptism, and our enlistment in our work for Christ, was God’s idea before it was ours. Any reward or honour comes from God, not from the visible positive results of what we have accomplished. We do our best, we look to God for guidance, but it’s up to God to grant the fruit, the reward, the honour, the glory.

So often, when we think we have failed, God takes our failures and weaves them into God's purposes in spite of us. We play our small parts in the great drama of God's redemption of the world, only to be surprised that God has worked out larger purposes than we could have imagined.

I am privileged to be a member of the Candidates Committee of our Presbytery. This is the committee which interviews and oversees the process of identifying and training candidates for specified ministries within our church. At present we have a large number of people proceeding through the discernment and training process, I think at least 10 in all. And that is great!

But just the other day I read of a similar committee elsewhere that made a point of asking its candidates "What has been your experience of failure in the church?" The report states that the candidates' response to that question is revealing. No failures? No initiative, no risk taken, no great work attempted and therefore little accomplished. Failures? So often a sign of initiative, creativity and faith!

No wonder in the reading today the despairing, failed prophet hears God say: "Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you".

Over the next few months our congregation has a wonderful opportunity to think creatively about our corporate sense of call and the shape of our response, as we look to God for guidance in reviewing our ministry here. What is our future in mission? Can we accept the risk of failure? Can we trust God to guide us? It's an exciting time to be called to journey with Jesus and to be assured that even our failures can be woven into the fabric of God's good intentions for the world.

Let us then live out our response to God's call to us in Jesus, and give God the glory in all things and at all times.

And now to God be all praise, majesty, power and dominion, forever and ever, Amen.