

LIFE AS VOCATION

To talk about life as vocation I would like to go right back to the very beginning. In his letter to the Ephesians, St Paul says something very interesting. He says; “Before the foundation of the world, God chose us.” (Eph 1:4). Before the world was made, before the first atom was created, before even time began – he chose us. Amazing to think that we were intended from eternity.

Psalm 118 says; “It was your hands that made me and shaped me.” We are no accident, no chance happening. We have been chosen as the unique person we are, woven into the story of creation from the very beginning. As Saint John Henry Newman puts it: “God created me for some definite purpose.” There is something unique I bring to the world just by being me and by what I will do if I am true to myself, to the seeds God has planted within me. In the words of St Catherine of Siena: “Be who God created you to be, and you will set the world on fire.”

In the Book of Revelation it says that when we meet the Lord we will be given a white stone, and on that stone will be written a new name, known only to the one to whom it is given. (*Revelation 2:17*) Many suggest that it will be the word God spoke to create us, our true name. That word has been spoken only once in all of existence (because, unlike us, God has an infinite vocabulary). It is an incredibly beautiful word, immeasurably rich and full of power, wisdom, and potential, spoken with a love so immense as to impossible to comprehend. God spoke that word and I began to be.

What a moment it will be when that word is revealed to us, when our eyes finally open to the full truth of who we are - created in the image and likeness of God. As the poet, Derek Walcott, puts it: “The time will come when with *elation* you greet yourself...” Wow, so that’s who I am! Saint Paul, in his letter to the Romans, says that all creation is waiting for this moment when the children of God finally wake up to who they really are.

I believe we all have a sense of it because God continues to whisper that Word to us softly throughout our lives. “Listen with the ear of your heart.” Can you hear what it is saying to you, how it is drawing you?

This to me is the first and most fundamental meaning of vocation. That we are called into existence to be a unique presence in the world. Our fundamental task is to be ourselves – our true, full selves, the person we were created to be.

The best starting point on that journey is a profound sense of gratitude and wonder. Psalm 139 is a stunning reflection on the mystery of each human life. “It was you who formed my inmost being, knit me together in my mother’s womb. I thank you for the wonder of my being. I am fearfully and wonderfully made.” St Paul puts it very simply: “We are God’s work of art.” (Eph. 2:7) God wants us to rejoice in who we are, to admire his handiwork, to trust that we are his work of art. The journey starts with appreciation – not comparison or finding fault, which come all too easily to us.

There is a saying that when we go to meet God he won’t say; “Why were you not Moses, or Martin Luther King or Mother Teresa?” or whoever you might like to choose, but rather “Why were you not the person I created you to be?” This is my call, the only one I am asked to fulfil or am able to fulfil.

I think it was Michelangelo who, when talking about how he created a sculpture, said that he didn’t just see a block of stone and decide for himself what he would create with it. He said it was more like sensing, having a vision, an intuition of what lies waiting already in the stone itself. For him creating a sculpture was a process of working in harmony with that - of liberating, setting free what was already there within the stone waiting to emerge.

That is a wonderful image for what our vocation is. God began the work of creation when he formed you in secret, knit you together in your mother’s womb. Now, however, for that work to reach its fulfilment, he needs your

co-operation. It is to be, and was always meant to be, a work born of your freedom, a joint creation, a collaborative masterpiece. Part of your role is to consent, to trust him, to let him work on you, and to allow some of the things that are trapping you, that are hiding your true form, to fall away - sometimes easily, sometimes not without struggle or pain. It is *up to you to choose life* and freedom by letting go of whatever is blocking it – anger, fear, envy, selfishness, ego, jealousy, pride, regret, possessiveness, competitiveness. It is your role to “co-create” – to make choices that allow that full self, the person you sense waiting within, to grow and to shine through.

In one of the parishes I worked in in Ireland the parish church underwent a major renovation. To everyone’s surprise by far the most transformative thing that was done was that the stained-glass windows were thoroughly cleaned. Suddenly they came alive - and they were beautiful! As the sun shone through them they were revealed in all their fullness, their multi-coloured glory, and the church itself was transformed, bathed in a beautiful light.

What is it that you are being called to let go of so that your real life can shine through? And what is your real life. How do you find it, your particular vocation, the right path for you? I think the answer is captured by an image Saint Benedict gives us of Jesus calling out in the marketplace: “Who is there here who longs for life?” You find your vocation by listening to how you long for life, to how you hear that whisper of your true, full, free self within. What draws you, really engages you, matters to you, inspires you? What fills your heart with joy? When do you feel somehow, despite everything, “right”? I think your “call” your “vocation” is much closer than you might think? It is the voice of your true self calling to you. It is already there in the people and things you love.

If you follow that voice it will lead you on an ever-deepening journey of discovery, of coming home. And it is the journey of a lifetime! It is a wonderful thing to discover people in their advanced years still vibrant and engaged and learning, discovering. And there is always more to discover because your full life is immensely rich.

The final thing I would like to say is this. “It is only by living for something greater than themselves that human beings find true happiness and live their humanity to the full.” This is how we truly come alive. As Brother Roger of Taizé puts it: “Dare to give yourself for others; and you will find the meaning of your life.” It is in giving yourself that you find what you are looking for. It is in learning to love that you begin to unlock life’s greatest riches. Look to your own experience and you will see that it is true: It is in those times that you loved, that you really gave yourself – to your family, your loved ones, your friends, your community, to a project, a passion, a cause, to help another - that life opened up for you. Dare to give, to say “yes” to life. Who knows where your saying yes might lead you! As you give yourself something will begin to grow, how you don’t quite know, you hardly notice, but first a shoot appears, and then the stalk and then the head, and then the grain, and suddenly you discover harvest time has come, the time of rejoicing, the time when your heart “overflows with the inexpressible delight of love.” (*Mark 4:27-29; RSB Prologue 49*).

It’s not about fame or notoriety or influence or impact, although those may come if it is right for you. No - it is about living *wholeheartedly* the life you were created to live. That brings a peace, a wholeness and a joy that nothing else can bring. What difference will you make? That’s up to God in the wisdom of his plan – a plan in which you have always had a part.

When God looked down on the earth who really stood out for him? Strangely it wasn’t anyone “important” - it was a simple ordinary young woman called Mary from a nondescript town called Nazareth in Galilee. Yet she turned out to be one of the most important people in the world.

Perhaps, like her, you sometimes sense yourself to be in the presence of Something, Someone greater than yourself, the Mystery at the heart of life, the One who created you, and you will feel as if you are somehow being addressed, invited to make an act of trust, of consent.

And you find yourself saying: “Yes, let your will be done in me.”
This is how the greatest journey of all begins.

Suggestions for the day

- (1) Read Psalm 139 slowly and make it your prayer of thanks to the Lord for your life.
- (2) Take some quiet time to listen. At this stage in your journey how is life/God calling to you, drawing you?
- (3) Take a moment to reflect: What are the things that stifle the life, goodness and freedom in you? Can you name them? What might be like if you were able to let go of them, to live without them?
- (4) Read Saint John Henry Newman’s prayer. What would it be like to live your life alert to the moments when you could make a crucial difference?
- (5) An examen of gratitude: sit, remember all the things you have to be grateful for: people, experiences, moments you treasure, gifts you possess. Perhaps look also at the ways you have been able to give to others, to be there for them, a presence in their lives.
- (6) Maybe ask some people who know you well what they think you have to bring to life. Maybe even what they think gets in the way!

May God bless you this day.

Glory be...

Some Texts

Psalm 139

¹O LORD, you search me and you know me.
²You yourself know my resting and my rising;
you discern my thoughts from afar.
³You mark when I walk or lie down;
you know all my ways through and through.

⁴Before ever a word is on my tongue,
you know it, O LORD, through and through.
⁵Behind and before, you besiege me,
your hand ever laid upon me.
⁶Too wonderful for me, this knowledge;
too high, beyond my reach.

⁷O where can I go from your spirit,
or where can I flee from your face?
⁸If I climb the heavens, you are there.
If I lie in the grave, you are there.

⁹If I take the wings of the dawn
or dwell at the sea's furthest end,
¹⁰even there your hand would lead me;
your right hand would hold me fast.

¹¹If I say, "Let the darkness hide me
and the light around me be night,"
¹²even darkness is not dark to you,
the night shall be as bright as day,
and darkness the same as the light.

¹³For it was you who formed my inmost being,
knit me together in my mother's womb.
¹⁴I thank you who wonderfully made me;
how wonderful are your works,
which my soul knows well!

¹⁵My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being fashioned in secret
and moulded in the depths of the earth.

¹⁶Your eyes saw me yet unformed;
and all days are recorded in your book,
formed before one of them came into being.

¹⁷To me how precious your thoughts, O God;
how great is the sum of them!

¹⁸If I count them, they are more than the sand;
at the end I am still with you.

Prayer by Saint John Henry Cardinal Newman (excerpt)

God has created me to do him some definite service;
he has committed some work to me
which he has not committed to another.
I have my mission – I may never
know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next.

I am a link in a chain,
a bond of connection between persons.
He has not created me for nothing.
I shall do good. I shall do his work.
I shall be an angel of peace,
a preacher of truth in my own place while not intending it –
if I do but keep his Commandments.

QUOTATIONS

The human self also has a nature, limits as well as potentials. If you seek vocation without understanding the material you are working with, what you build with your life will be ungainly and may well put lives in peril, your own and some of those around you.

Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am.

(Parker J. Palmer, Let Your Life Speak)

Often we want to be somewhere other than where we are, to even to be someone other than who we are. We tend to compare ourselves constantly with others and wonder why we are not as rich, as intelligent, as simple, as generous, or as saintly as they are. Such comparisons make us feel guilty, ashamed, or jealous. It is very important to realize that our vocation is hidden in where we are and who we are. We are unique human beings, each with a call to realize in life

what nobody else can, and to realize it in the concrete context of the here and now.

(Henri J.M. Nouwen, Bread for the Journey)

But I am convinced that we have drifted from the true focus of God's activity in this world. It is not to be found in the extraordinary, but in the "ordinary", the everyday. The problem is not that we are too active, but that we are recklessly frenetic. We have grown accustomed to quick fixes and easy solutions. We have grown accustomed to running sprints instead of training for the long-distance marathon. We have plenty of energy. The danger is that we will burn ourselves out on restless anxieties and unrealistic expectations.

We want big results - sooner rather than later. And we've forgotten that God showers his extraordinary gifts through ordinary means of grace...

What we are called to do every day, right where God has placed us, is rich and rewarding.

(Michael Horton, Ordinary)