

Sermon for renewal of our sense of vocation and commitment – Brian Russell

Maundy Thursday 2008 at Birmingham, Cathedral.

“If I do not wash your feet, you are not part of me”. (from John 15)

I stand before you today as the former Vicar of a horse racing village.

A week or so ago I was travelling to Gloucester Cathedral. I was due to leave New Street at 8.30 and have before found the train nearly empty. I was looking forward to a meditative and thoughtful time. Of course, I knew it was the first day of the Cheltenham horse racing festival, but thought I was safe at 8.30 in the morning....Well, no....The train rapidly filled with people everywhere – a good many on top of me...I noticed carrier bags on the tables with bottles of champagne. Ah, I thought, this is for when they have a winner....Well, No....Between Kings Norton and Barnt Green, bottles were opened and corks shot in all directions (I ducked)...Clearly, Cheltenham festival is a whole day event – the champagne breakfast.....We fell into conversation....Did I have an interest in the Festival? Well, yes, but I thought I would record the highlights and see them at a later time....No, No, NO, it's not the same, I was told....”You have to **be there**, Vicar. **You have to be part of it.**”

So, people can have a sense of vocation about going to the Cheltenham Festival. You have to be there and to be part of it.

We have a sense of vocation about the Easter Festival but we would give it different content. We need to be there with Jesus tonight as he washes our feet, equipping us and spiritually cleaning us for our ministry. We need to share fellowship with Jesus at his last Supper and when we do this with him in remembrance of him (our reading from Corinthians). On Good Friday we stand with him in his suffering – and he stands with us – and on Easter morning he takes us with him into the beginnings of new life in his ministry and mission.

I recount some incidents that bring out issues about our sense of vocation – none of which relate (I must clarify) to people in the Diocese of Birmingham! But for many years I have listened and asked questions of those exploring what a sense of vocation might be and where it might come from...

Someone really desiring to be ordained once said to me: “If you stand in my way, I will *know that you are wrong*...” Well, a strong sense of personal call, *if* from Christ, would be one that in time the Church of Christ – and the Bishop – might come to recognise...

Someone else, when asked what had brought them to this point, replied: “I do not know; my friends think I should be here; my Vicar and Wardens are certain I should be here; but I am not sure....” The Church can call where it sees the gifts and the

stirrings...but, in time, the person has to come to own this and be committed to it, however reluctantly.

Of course, there needs to be some evidence of a growing sense of calling. I once asked a quite reasonable question – “What is at the heart of the Christian Gospel you want to offer?” The reply was that it was about loving God and others. I said I thought this was a starting point but could I have some bullet points and perhaps some comment about Jesus....”Good gracious,” came the reply, “I would need notice of that question...I am not asked those questions at the golf club.”

This morning we need the help of a theologian..... who can guide us into thinking about the experience of vocation we find in Jesus.

My theologian is Dietrich Bonhoeffer who gave great thought to Christian Discipleship and writes about it in his telling book “The cost of discipleship”. Bonhoeffer saw that as we grow into our discipleship and follow Jesus there will be points of *breach* - breaks in the continuity – of our lives. We will have cause to think again and re-assess our loyalties, our values and identity. He uses the example of the story of Abraham, Sarah and Isaac. Abraham and Sarah are to be the bearers of God’s purposes for the whole of creation so that the people of God flow from their family. But they have no child: it is an impossible promise. Then comes the gift of the child, the child utterly essential for the promise to be fulfilled. But then Abraham feels called to offer that child in sacrifice. He offers what is essential to God’s purposes and does not hold back. This is the moment of breach. Because he has offered, the child is returned. Now Abraham holds his son quite differently. The son is no longer a possession, something to be held for his own control and identity. The son is let free and released by Abraham to serve the purposes that God has. The very act of freeing the child opens up the flow of God’s future and creativity can flourish.

For Bonhoeffer himself, this was true in his experience of vocation. He became called to oppose his own Nazi government as a Christian witness and prophet. For him this involved a breach with nation, with social group, and the need to find a new network of people with whom he could identify with Christ. Such a breach is costly.

We can now take some examples from the experience Jesus has in searching out his vocation. I offer a three examples of where a breach might be involved.

“Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house and about my Father’s business”, he tells his distraught parents at the age of 12 when he has stayed on in the temple. Of course, he returns with them and to a family life, but he returns in different relationships. A breach has been made. His commitment to family and village takes place under his over-riding commitment - the claim of his Father on him. The breach begins an expansion – he comes to see all his follows as part of an extended fellowship, for all these are his brothers, sister, Mother.

The Canaanite woman seeks help for her daughter at the point of death. Jesus is very clear. “I am **only** called to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”. But she will not accept this. She says that she is one of the dogs that gather up the crumbs that fall

from the table. Jesus responds and makes a breach. He is no longer ONLY called to what he thought. It is certainly a breach in his practice of mission – but perhaps also in his understanding – and it opens up the scope and range of the mission of God in the whole creation.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, there is a real struggle for him. This story is a parallel to the temptations. In his temptations in the wilderness, he remains bonded with the father's will. But what is won once needs to be worked through again and again. Jesus is still struggling in Gethsemane to hold to his Father's will. He is drawn by his own natural concern for security in wishing this cup to pass him by so that he can avoid coming to the Cross. But the final breach is made and he stands to face his arrest.

Does the experience Jesus has of vocation have pointers for our experience of vocation as disciples and as those who are ordained?

Well, we can perhaps stand in the experience of Abraham. We come into ministry with - and develop through service - a range of gifts and insights. But they have to be handed over to God and not held to us as if our own possession. When we hold back to secure our own position, security and identity, then God's purposes are not fully at work. It is as we hand over for God to take and use what we bring, that creativity can flourish and God's purposes flow through what we offer.

When we consider family, friendships, networks of support, we can see that we need to work with the nature of loyalties to family, friend and group, just as Jesus did. It is a matter of careful discernment so that God's purpose is our over-riding claim. The other commitments are real and are met by being held under and as part of our commitment to God's purposes.

There may well be points in our discipleship when we want to put down a marker and say "I am called ONLY to **this**...whatever *this* is..." This may have been something we believed was integral and essential to God's purposes. And yet, we seemed to be called to make a breach and to enter into a wider scope of God's mission and purpose. It is costly. At our last Diocesan Synod on Saturday, we heard stories of people and churches making this kind of step as they spoke of how they felt called to be present and engaged with people of other world Faiths. That is one example. We may have our own sticking points which will be different for each one of us.

There is a natural tendency to think about how we start on the way of discipleship and vocation. But the story of Gethsemane helps us to work with the fact that we need to go on making our commitment, in changing circumstances, again and again. We have never arrived, and concerns for our own security and identity can return and will make for a new struggle along the way.

So, finally, we come to today's Gospel....."If I do not wash you, you have no part in me".

This story is not, I think, a point of breach for Jesus. In seeking to wash our feet, to serve and equip us to share in his mission, he is at one with how he has just entered

Jerusalem on a *donkey*. But it is a point of breach for Peter. He cannot allow Jesus to serve him in this way. It is not how they should be relating. It goes against the grain. But: "If I do not wash you, you have no part in me."

In terms of starting on discipleship and vocation, Peter has made the breach. He has left the livelihood he knows, the community which gives him his sense of belonging, the place where he has his position. He has given up all this to follow Jesus. But now comes a new point of breach – a point he becomes able to cross. He receives so that he may become one of those who serve on behalf of Christ.

Perhaps Peter stands especially for us today. We can think of how we first made the breach in our experience of vocation. We can think of being called into new and different challenges. **But the experience of vocation is also about how to continue and how to remain.** As I listen with clergy who have been on a long run in a post, or place or particular setting and responsibilities, I often see that being there has taken a number of different phases or stages and that the present marks a change of phase. One reaction is to think that the time has to move to a new post because someone else will better come in for this new phase. There are certainly times when moving in this way can be the right thing. But not always. There are also times when the person in place is the one who holds the trust and confidence and can be the best person to work with that change and help to bring God's purposes through that threshold.

It is not easy to meet such a point. We may feel it goes against the grain. Hopefully, when we begin in a post, we feel there is a *reasonable* match of our gifts and interests to what is needed to meet God's mission. But situations change; we ourselves change. The changes may bring us and the situation into a greater alignment than when we began – which is very creative. But it may not do. It may seem to take us further from the core of what we believe we can bring with confidence.

The image of going against the grain is interesting. We can stain or cut wood against the grain. We can stroke a cat against the fall of its fur – it does not like this one little bit (I can assure you). We, too, can feel ruffled up in this way by what now seems asked of us. There is also a parallel from sport. If you were ever asked to play out of your natural position, you will know how uneasy this is, and yet you can gain additional skills and habits that serve you well if you then return to your favoured position. So, perhaps it is, as we go against the grain, we are stretched and opened to grow in ways that draw new potential and new contributions from us. But it is costly.

So, this morning we come together with our Bishop to make a new commitment to our discipleship and vocation.

We are called to be here with Jesus and **to be part of it.** We are to let Christ cleanse and renew us for ministry. We are to be with him in fellowship each and every time we do this in remembrance of him at communion. We are stand with him in his suffering – as he stands with us in ours – and to we are to be brought by him into a new beginning that opens up the new life that comes through the raising of Christ.

It is as we reflect on the experience which Jesus has of vocation that our sense of vocation can be renewed and strengthened...And we can find given to us the confidence to follow. Amen.