

Our Calling & Vocation part 2

Let's recap on what we covered in part 1 last week

We started by looking at our vision as church, our sense of where we are going (power point). Over the past few weeks we've spent some time looking at our identity, & now we are moving on to look at our sense of mission & vocation.

The passage we looked at last week was Ephesians 2:4-10, which talks about how lost we once were without Jesus in our lives, and then how much grace & love & kindness & mercy we have now found in Jesus. And then that passage culminated in verse 10 which says

For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

and from this we learnt two things - 1stly that we are God's handiwork, God's work of art, God's masterpiece. In fact the word Paul uses here is the Greek word poiēma, from which we get our English word poem. In other words, we are God's poem. Now this is important as we also learned last week that what we do must flow out of who we are & what we have received. We can't give away to others or to the world more than who we are & what we have. *"we can only give away who we are. We can only offer to others what God has in us"*
Richard Rohr

The second thing we learned from Eph 2:10 is that, in Christ, we have been created to do good works, works that were prepared in advance for you & for I to do. There are specific works that only you & I can do that no one else can do; & if you & I don't do them, then the world, & the church & the KOG, will be a poorer place.

Last week we also looked at a couple of big, foundational Biblical concepts that are often misunderstood & misused. And I confessed how hard I had struggled to understand these words when I first became a Christian. One was that word 'sin' - & so we looked at the main Hebrew & Greek words for 'sin', & saw that they both mean 'missing the way' or 'missing the mark'; & while most of us are not out there doing gross & immoral things, many, many of us are missing the mark, & are not being the people God created us to be, or doing the things that God created us to do.

The second big concept we looked at last week was the word 'holiness' and I shared with you a definition of that word that I had found really helpful, really liberating, & really powerful:

"HOLINESS - from the Old German word for "whole". The attribute of a being that entirely fulfils the purpose of its existence and is thus at one with itself. Strictly speaking, therefore, only God can be holy....". (The Concise Dictionary of Theology)

And I shared with you how powerful it had been when I realised that God wants to share His holiness with us all; that holiness and wholeness are gifts, not something we can attain

by striving or effort or self-flagellation, but gifts that God longs to give us & will give us through Jesus.

OK. so that's the recap from last week, & it sets the scene for what I want to talk about this week, as we push a little further into understanding our sense of mission and vocation as followers of Jesus in this world.

Lets look again at the verse that James read to us earlier:

2 Timothy 1:8-10 New English Translation (NET Bible)

So do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me, a prisoner for his sake, but by God's power accept your share of suffering for the gospel. **9** *He is the one who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not based on our works but on his own purpose and grace, granted to us in Christ Jesus before time began*, but now made visible through the appearing of our Saviour Christ Jesus. He has broken the power of death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel!

and I really want to focus especially on verse 9, were Paul says

He has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not based on our works but on his own purpose and grace, granted to us before time began

which is actually very reminiscent of what we read back in Ephesians 2:10, that this salvation, this wholeness, this new way of life that we have received, is nothing we have earned or deserved, but is a gift based in God's grace & mercy; and we also learn from this verse that we are called to live out a calling, a high calling that God has had planned for us from before we were even born.

Each of us have a calling on our lives, and it is a holy calling. Remember our definition of holiness? This is not about us being 'holier than thou', or self righteous, or people who flagellate themselves & take ice baths to try & purge ourselves of our humanity- in fact it is almost the opposite of that - we in fact become more truly human, as God shares his holiness with us & as the Spirit of Jesus has more & more reign in our lives. Jesus said "I have come that you might have life and life in all its fullness" (John 10:10). Holiness is not a misery trip. You know, in a lot of books & media, there's this horrible caricature of holiness that's all to do with guilt & punishment & self-abuse, like that character in The Da Vinci Code who whips his own back & tightens a loop of barb wire around his thigh, in order to punish himself for being such a sinner. But true holiness is the opposite of that - it is about becoming more human as we become more and more the people we were created to be in the first place.

This is why Paul can say in 2 Corinthians 3:17-18

*"Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. **18** And we all, who with unveiled faces reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit"*

This is also why the New Testament refers to each of us as saints, and why Paul routinely starts off most of his letters with things like "*this is to the holy & faithful brothers & sisters in Christ at Colosse*" (Col 1:2) or as he starts off the first letter to the Corinthians "*To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 1:2).*

Again, the popular use of that word 'saint' has confused the issue for us - you know that image that it is someone morally perfect who floats around above the ground & has a visible halo & who never loses their temper & who would never ever swear, no matter how much the situation deserved it.

Now the word the NT uses when it calls us saints, is a Greek word “hagios” which again means “holy”. And it’s really significant that Paul uses it to describe the Christians at Corinth, because as we read further into that letter we see that they were far from perfect; in fact they were making all kinds of mistakes & screw ups. And they probably swore quite a lot too. And from the outside, to a human observer, it would have looked like their lives were a bit of a mess. But they were on a journey, and God doesn’t just look at where we are at right now - he looks at where we started from - & some of us started from way back here, and it’s going to take quite a while before our lives look like they are coming together. And God also looks & where we are going, and he knows how beautiful our lives will become if we just keep going.

Now you’ll notice that this verse uses another unusual word that we don’t use in everyday English, where it says we have been ‘sanctified’ by Jesus.

The Greek word translated "sanctification" literally means "to make something holy." And so Jesus is making us holy. But it also has the meaning of “setting something apart for particular use & for a special purpose”

To sanctify someone or something is to set that person or thing apart for the use intended for it by its designer. A human being is sanctified, whenever he or she lives according to God’s design and purpose. And not just people, the other parts of the created order are also sanctified & made holy when they operate according to the purpose God created them for.

And this is the amazing process that we are now caught up in now: God by his Spirit is sharing his holiness with us & working to make us more whole, more human; and we are on a journey to becoming people that *fulfil the purpose of our existence*, people that begin to be and to do those things we were created to be & to do.

Mission & Vocation

OK, lets start talking about the mission & vocation that God has given us; Today I’m not going to go too deeply into the mission aspect, because we will have a number of people speaking on mission over the next few weeks. But I do want to say this: the first version of the great commission given to us in the earliest gospel is this: ‘*And Jesus said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all Creation”*’ (Mark 16:15). We have a mandate to see all of creation come back into right relationship with its creator, for all creation to be restored to its full holiness - yes, first & foremost we want to see that happen with all the people of the earth - of course, but not just people, its *all of creation*, - & Bill Lee & Phil Scadden will talk with us more about that in a few weeks time.

But let’s get more specific still & talk now about our sense of vocation. We often use this word vocation simply as a way of talking about a person’s employment or main occupation, but actually there’s more to it than that. The word itself stems from an ancient Latin word *vocātiō* - which means call or calling.

And originally this word vocation was never used in a secular sense - it was only a word Christians ever used, & it had two applications: a general meaning - that all of humanity was called by God to know him; and then a specific meaning, that every single one of us as individuals also has a call on our lives. We are each called with a holy calling. We are God’s workmanship, God’s work of art, created to do good works prepared in advance for us to do.

Now there are some lucky people who seem to know from a really early age what their vocation is - you know, by 15 they love cars & motors & know they have to work as some kind of mechanic; or by 16 they are fascinated by how the human body works, and know

they are going into medicine. But for most of us, there seems to be quite a long period of trial & error & trying out different things, with each step refining our sense of vocation.

I know for me, this was very much how it has worked. After I left Varsity, I felt God calling me away from further academic study, and towards people, in fact into nursing. I had a year to fill-in before I could get into nursing training, & so I got a job as nurse aid in an old people's home & hospital - I & did that full-time for a year & then part-time for another three years. Now from a purely worldly or self-interested point of view, you could argue that it wasn't a great job: the pay was low, the hours were long, most of the work was about feeding and bathing and dressing and toileting these very elderly people and often disabled people. And actually quite a high percentage of the work involved dealing with faeces and urine, which was all a bit of a shock having come from the sanitised world of the University. But I tell you what, it was one of the best jobs I have ever, ever had, in terms of God teaching me about people, and people's need to be listened to and to be treated with compassion and dignity, and in terms of God teaching me about myself. I still refer to that year as my Discipleship Training School year. After graduating from nursing school, I went into mental health, and I worked as a psych nurse, alternating that with spells as a residential youth worker, before Susan & I eventually felt a sense of call to go and work in Cambodia - Susan using her medical training and me using all the training I had received up until then.

Very often then, is not so much that we get this once & for all epiphany revealing our vocation, but more that God uses the work that he places us in to refine us & shape us & train us to become the kind of people he wants us to become.

Now I wonder if you have ever heard this phrase: "if you find a job you really love, you'll never have to work another day in your life", which is picking up on the idea that that if you can find something you just absolutely love doing, & then get a job in that area, it'll be so wonderful, because the hours will just fly by while you're blissing out in this perfect role.

And of course this is basically a lie, because every job, even the best, contain aspects that are sheer hard work, and grind, and sometimes just plain boring. And we were warned of that back in Genesis 3, when Adam was told he was going to have to work the ground and earn his food by the sweat of his brow. Yes, its true, if we are doing what God has called us to do, we will have those moments of being in the flow, and using all our gifts as they were meant to be used, and loving what we are doing, and there will be an overall sense of satisfaction and contribution to the greater good: but work is also hard. Its supposed to be. That's why its called work.

And whats more, the reality of our global economy which is so unequal, & so tilted in favour of a few, means that in so many parts of the world, working in a factory 10 hours a day may be a persons only choice, or rather their choice is between that and no job at all. And when you are without a job, then all this talk of vocation can seem a little ridiculous.

And for those of us with limited choices, who don't get to find our dream job, I think what God wants to teach us is that *if we cant do what we love, then we need to learn to love what we do*. And here's where we pick up on that exhortation from Colossians 3:23-24 "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as if working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving"

In many ways, what work we do matters way less than how we do that work, & how much we reflect Jesus in our work, and how much we allow God to train & discipline & disciple us through our work. Our work is about two things: what we can create that make the world a better place, and what God can create in us, in our character.

I love this quote from Martin Luther King Jr about work, which picks up on this idea:
“If a man is called to be a street-sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, here lived a great street-sweeper who did his job well”.

The goal of work is never about us finding the easiest job or the cushiest job or the highest paid job or the highest status job or the dreamiest job. The goal of work is finding that place where you can use the unique gifts that God has placed in you in order to make the world a better place.

In Romans 12 vs 1, Paul exhorts us to offer our bodies to God as holy & living sacrifices, so that we might be transformed and also be agents of transformation in the world.

And so I'd like us to do that now: I'd like us to pause and with open hands offer to God our bodies, our hands & our feet, our minds, our time, & whatever it is we do with our hours, paid or unpaid or as volunteers, including the hours we put in as students, as parents & grandparents, & as children within our families. Because really it doesn't matter what our job is - builder, care-giver, teacher, doctor, lawyer, home-maker, volunteer - whatever - what matters is that we have given that job & that role over to God so that God can use it for his glory, to extend his holiness further and further out into the world.

Let's pray now, & join me in opening you hands & offering your time & your body & your work back to God for his glory. PRAY.

The goal of all work, of everything we do, is to bring glory to God, and to make the world a more holy place: a place where every person and every part of creation is able to fulfil the purpose it was created for, where every person is able to come into the fullness of life that Jesus promised.

We're going to finish now, and Pauline & her team are going to lead us in our final song, and after that there will be the opportunity for prayer up the front here if you'd like to talk & pray with someone further about your sense of vocation, & the things that you feel God may be calling you to do.

But before Pauline comes and does that, Waldir has some important things he'd like to share with us about his sense of vocation right now