

THING AGAIN

Vocation

The idea of *vocation* seems to follow close on the heels of the idea of *creation*. If our lives are not random and accidental, but the result of a specific act of will on God's part, then we are already part of a greater plan than can be read in our isolated individual life.

To put it another way, when God calls me into being, he calls me by my name, as the person I am, and my first duty to God is to be the person he made me. We should, to that extent, take ourselves seriously, and not accept the world's assessment of us, for good or ill. I will be judged, not on how far I resemble Bill Gates, Gandhi, or Michelangelo, but on how far I am Philip.

Hearing the Call is to be understood only in the above context. We may see all kinds of rôle on offer in the world ahead of us. Is there a sense in which we can recognize a particular path which God wants us to take?

I don't think we should be too rigid about this. God wants us to reflect him in his world, by our understanding and generous response to him, and that is already a personal call. I feel quite sure that each of us can find ways to do this that make just and creative use of the gifts he has given in our making. Are the gifts used by a nursing nun, however, different in kind to those needed by the mother of a family? Are the specific conditions that make these lives different, even exclusive, the work of God or ours? I wish I felt more confidence in the human structures that differentiate various "vocations" so clearly! I often think that our response to God is hampered by the obstacles human beings have (in their wisdom, which is foolishness to God) used to structure the world.

I think (rightly or wrongly) that I can spot some people for whom the world is set up badly. In a University there are hurdles at regular intervals - exams, essay deadlines, and the rest - which lead on to the bestowal of qualifications, which lead on to career opportunities. Sometimes I see people who should not or cannot progress that way. Maybe they will flag and fail in the road.

Sometimes they will fulfil all that is asked of them, but still feel a sense of emptiness at the prospect. Perhaps this experience can alert us to the reality of a personal vocation that resembles the call of prophets or apostles in the Bible - the unmistakable sense that God is asking something special, that a sort of conversion is called for, the breaking of fresh ground. In this sense I do believe in that providential operation of "vocation" that interferes with one's established disposition, continually and persistently presenting itself in challenges, questions, dreams, sudden moments of vision and glimpses of an unexpected form of love - things too real to be disregarded without a feeling of pain or even betrayal.

Generosity and Discernment It may be much easier to disregard these impulses than to follow them up. We may feel that we are playing with fire, and that common-sense is the best policy; we can find enough level-headed people to back us up in this, and with straightforward counselling from the right people it is usually easy to shelve the idea that our lives are "called" to anything so uncertain. But the only way to get peace of mind would be to let the idea come into the open and be tested. After all, there is something in us - deeply buried and unrecognized - that is resounding to some outside influence. It is, whatever else, a moment of potential, perhaps of revelation. We can never learn anything about ourselves that isn't of use. *We need to be generous in this place.*

Moonshine? I mentioned *dreams*, and we do not appear to believe very much in dreams today. Everything I've read about psychology makes me think they should be taken very

seriously indeed. They may not emanate from our conscious and heavily-conditioned mind. But the experience we have in our dreaming is all the more honest, all the more creative, because it is not channelled into the constrictions of our enslavements. Perhaps it is just because I mistrust the treadmills and the accepted *sine qua nons* of the world we struggle to survive in, that I value the freedom of which we get a glimpse in this notion of vocation. God calls ploughmen away from their fields (1K 19:19) and fishermen from their nets (Mk 1:16), and this is where worthwhile things begin to happen, where the unheard-of gets talked about, where wounds can begin to be healed. I find the prospect of further recruitment for the munitions-factory or the insurance industry a poor substitute, however common-sensical.

An Open Ear Outside the University and beyond the age where careers are sought, I find the idea of vocation changing radically. Many people in a community like a parish are almost completely unavailable for anything at all. They are always too busy when help is wanted, they are simply never there in a sudden crisis, they are insulated from the trembling at the edges of the world which remind any sensitive ear that *all is far from well*. People get out of the way of expecting anything of them; and rightly so. They will turn up with stolid regularity to Sunday Mass, pop a modicum in the collection for CaFOD twice a year, and keep the laws and customs as handed down by the fathers. There are others who are simply agog for the needs of those around them, retiring from work to find there are not enough hours in the day. They are depended on by hosts of people, and they move from one act of sustenance to another with uncomplaining constancy. They are alert ears and eyes, engaged in adequate response. What is the difference between these two sorts of individual?

Fluences From On High The perceptions flowing from the attempt to live close to God and from prayerful regard for the world are not the only things that sow seeds of vocation. People about us are already living lives which challenge us to say what we will do. The love we receive from others probably damages us if we have no response to make out of gratitude. I believe that our parents and those who care for us are “calling” us to a particular way of being in the world; and in this they are echoing the call of the Father in a way which involves us personally; they are his messengers to us. They speak our language because they have helped to constitute our world. The realism of their witness makes them ideally placed to make us believe in the possibility of a loving and self-giving life. The general warning of the Gospel, that we should be *alert* to what is about us, holds good here in a special way.

It's A Real Vocation is what people say if you're going to be overworked and you aren't going to get paid properly. This talk has rightly gone out of fashion in nursing and so on. But most people would know what it means to say that nursing as we have known it must suffer if it comes to be regarded merely as a career. This is because people have truly recognised in many nurses a compassion and generosity that could not be supplied for any amount of salary, and this is prized even above professional competence, its influence felt to be deeply healing and holy. People easily use religious language when speaking of the care they have experienced from “good” nurses. Surely we should not restrict the sense of vocation to such easily-identified areas as health-care, professional religious life, emergency services, teaching, and so forth. There are saints who were kings and soldiers, even if they are exceptions to the rule. The world awaits the canonization of the first stockbroker, and perhaps we should lend our - deeply involved - minds to the question of how a stockbroker, divorce lawyer, or advertising executive might achieve sanctity other than by an heroic spare-time career in the Society of St Vincent de Paul.