

Called, sent, waiting

St. Brandon's

Ezekiel 2:1-5; Psalm 123; 2 Cor 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13

8th July 2018

For one point, who wrote these words: "They also serve who only stand and wait"? John Milton (of course) at the end of a sonnet called? – "When I consider how my light is spent". Two points! A third point will be available later, and points mean irrelevant measures of merit. What do points mean ... prizes (all you Radio 4 listeners)!

I wonder, as the readings were read to us this morning, whether you were able to identify with any of the main characters in them. Personally, I had a strong sense of inadequacy as I looked through them in preparation. First we had Ezekiel, receiving a powerful vision of God, receiving a spirit – probably the Holy Spirit – clearly called by God and equally clearly sent to the people of Israel who were, at this point in exile in Babylon. He had received an even more dramatic vision in Chapter 1, and following our reading he is given a scroll with words of lamentation and mourning and woes. And he is told to eat the scroll so that he has the words that he is to speak inside him. Powerful stuff. They will indeed know that there has been a prophet among them.

Then there's Paul in our NT reading, equally party to amazing visions, equally obviously called through his Damascus Road experience, equally clearly sent as an Apostle to the Gentiles. And then Jesus Himself, obviously called as the Son of God, obviously sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And finally the twelve disciples, each called by Jesus, then here being sent out by Him with authority over unclean spirits and with the power to heal. Visions of God. Being called. Being sent in the power of God. It's enough to make you feel very inadequate.

Mind you, there is a downside to being sent. Ezekiel is told that they are a rebellious house, "impudent and stubborn" or "with "stiff faces" as an alternative translation puts it. But he must speak anyway, whether they hear or refuse to hear. (A similar position to many preachers today I think ... though clearly not here!) Paul gets beaten up many times as he goes on his missionary journeys. Jesus finds Himself rejected in His home town of Nazareth, and this perhaps anticipates His rejection by the whole people of Israel that brings His ministry to an abrupt if anticipated end. And Jesus tells His disciples to expect rejection – there will be places which will not welcome them and refuse to hear them. Being sent carries with it the likelihood of rejection and worse.

I asked whether you felt any kind of affinity with any of the main characters in our readings and, if you're like me, I think the answer might well be no. These are big characters, called by God in powerful and dramatic ways, and then sent by Him to do important things, and willing to accept rejection and worse as part of that.

But let's look at that a little more closely. I think we can reasonably easily go along with the calling part. We understand, I hope, that God's is a universal invitation, an invitation to all to receive His unconditional love and to follow Him in response. So all are called, all are invited, and in a sense all we need to do is respond to that.

So the problem is probably with the sending part. I feel uncomfortable with that partly because I'm not necessarily clear who I'm being sent to – it's much clearer for the main characters in these readings than it is for me. And I'm also not sure about how to proclaim the message of the Kingdom when the culture around me is relatively hostile to being told anything to do with religion, where other religions crowd in on the 'spiritual space' in society, when the Church as institution doesn't have a great reputation, and institutions in general find it difficult to engender trust. Who am I to tell them (whoever 'they' may be)

what they should be doing with their lives? And then, of course, there's a bit of reluctance on my part because I can anticipate the reaction, the rejection or worse.

Now I don't want to duck this entirely, but there is a character in our readings with whom I can identify rather more easily. And that's Jesus' brother James. James is named in our gospel reading as one of Jesus' siblings (well, brothers – typically, the sisters aren't named). He was presumably around when his older brother Jesus comes back to Nazareth, and he may have found himself in an awkward position, perhaps wanting to side with Jesus but finding the crowd turning against Jesus. So what became of James?

Well, we need to get our James's straight. There were James and John, two of the twelve disciples / apostles, the sons of Zebedee, whose mother (I wish she was called Florence and that they had a dog called Dougal) tried to get them a special place in the Kingdom (Matthew 20:20-21). But it's not that James. There was also James son of Alphaeus (Matthew 10:3), another disciple / apostle. But it's not that James. It seems that James the brother of Jesus was the James to whom Jesus appeared after His resurrection (1 Cor. 15:7), and who then became a leader of the Church in Jerusalem. It was this James who presided over the Council at Jerusalem where the infant Church decided that Gentiles didn't have to be circumcised (Acts 15). It was this James who Paul says he visited with Peter when he finally went to Jerusalem (Gal. 1:19). And it was probably this James who wrote the Epistle of James which appears near the end of the NT.

Now why do I say that I can identify with him? Well partly because there doesn't appear to be anything big and dramatic about him. He obviously knew Jesus, had to go through the process of unlearning that He was just his big brother and come to recognise Him as the Son of God, and to hear the call, to accept the invitation to follow. But then it doesn't seem as though he was 'sent' anywhere. Peter and Paul were off on their travels, evangelising everyone they met, but James seems to have stayed at home, or at least stayed at home in Jerusalem. And yes he became a leader in the church there, but his epistle is full of practical advice about how to get on with living the faith. 'Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger' (1:19); don't show favouritism to the rich over the poor (2:1-7); 'faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead' (2:17); tame your tongue (3:1-12); don't judge others (4:11-12); do not oppress your workers (5:1-6); 'let your 'Yes' be yes and your 'No' be no' (5:12); if you're suffering, pray, if you're cheerful sing songs of praise, if you're ill call the elders to pray over you (5:13-14).

This is all homely, though also challenging, practical advice about living out one's faith. And he also advises us to be patient until the coming of the Lord. 'The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth ... You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts for the coming of the Lord is near' (5:7-8).

So this does seem to offer us a way of living out the Christian life which we can perhaps associate with more easily. This doesn't mean that some may be 'sent', or that all of us are 'sent' at some point in our lives to certain people or to certain situations. It certainly doesn't mean that we should close off the possibility at any point in our lives of being sent by God to carry out a specific task. Vocations, whether to be a minister in the church or a vocation to some secular situation, are important and real and need to be followed. But for most of us most of the time I suspect it's a question of just getting on with the journey of faith in our ordinary everyday lives, living faithfully, worshipping the living God, loving our neighbour, keeping the story of the love of God for us in Christ going from one generation to the next, patiently waiting on God. 'So our eyes wait upon the Lord our God, until he have mercy upon us' as our Psalm put it. That might be a very good prayer as we wait – 'Lord, have mercy on us in our situation' whatever that may be for you.

I started with those lines from Milton's sonnet. For a third point, does anyone know the line which precedes the 'they also serve' bit?

'Thousands at his bidding speed

And post o'er land and ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and wait.'

Whether we are sent to speed o'er land and ocean without rest, or to serve God by standing and waiting,
may God have mercy on us.

Amen

When I consider how my light is spent
Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,
And that one talent which is death to hide
Lodg'd with me useless, though my soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest he returning chide;
"Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?"
I fondly ask. But Patience to prevent
That murmur, soon replies: "God doth not need
Either man's work or his own gifts; who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state
Is kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed
And post o'er land and ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and wait."

John Milton