

Nick Moir, 27 September 2020

Celebrating.... Work

This weekend 20 people are being ordained deacon in the cathedral by Bishop Stephen in 7 separate services as only 30 people are allowed at each; 12 are being ordained priest by Bishop Dagmar in four services around the diocese; next weekend 18 are being admitted and licensed as lay ministers in one Zoom service. All of them have, we trust been called by God to serve in these ways in the church.

But their primary vocation, their primary calling is not what they are now being commissioned for; and the primary sign and sacrament of their calling is not given through the laying on hands of the bishop. The primary sacrament or sign of our vocation as Christians is not ordination but our baptism – and it's not for a particular role in the church but to a particular mindset that shapes the way we live our lives in church in our homes and families, with our friends and in our work. And that calling is what Paul speaks about in our (first) reading, the calling to have the same mind in us as was in Christ Jesus.

It is, I said, a mindset, an attitude of mind, a shape of living and thinking that follows in the way of Jesus Christ. It is a way that involves going down that we may be raised up.

Going down? Emptying ourselves, taking the form of a servant, putting others' interests before our own. It is about – whether at church or at home or at work – putting our own ambitions second to the needs of others. There is no fundamental calling that is different between me and those of you living out your faith in the secular workplace. It's the same calling and that is to live out what we do with the same shape of living and attitude of mind that led our Lord to cast aside any divine pretensions of grandeur and to assume the role of a slave, 'The Son of Man', he said, 'did not come to be served but to serve'. It is font-shaped – stooping down and taking the lowest place and then being raised into glory.

Today we celebrate the world of work – a world where God is, for 'my Father' said Jesus 'is always at work'. And part of our Christian calling is to find him there and to join in. That requires us, as Paul says in the final part of our reading, to 'work out our own salvation with fear and trembling'. Those of us schooled on an evangelical, Protestant reading of the New Testament find these words of Paul strangely unPauline – surely he taught that we can contribute nothing to our salvation, which is a pure gift of grace, freely given – 'nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling'. Isn't this justification by works?

Here is the danger of reading Paul through the eyes of Luther and Calvin rather than through the eyes of Paul. He is not inconsistent; it's just that we have often misunderstood him. Effort, will, striving, working were not against Paul's creed; they were part of it. Work matters for Paul, what we do matters – and it matters for our souls and for our salvation. Our work helps make us the people we are, it is where we are formed, it is where we grow in character and virtue, it is the vital place where we live out our Christian calling – where the rubber hits the road.

But there is a second half to that sentence. 'Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his

good pleasure.’ Paul really is Pauline too – we are wholly dependent on the God who is at work in us, enabling us both to will and to work, that is both to want to do the right thing and then to do it.

If you find this mindset just too hard – you just aren’t humble and you don’t know how to be humble – then go back a few sentences and listen again to what Paul calls us to:

‘in humility regard others as better than yourselves’. You may not start off thinking they are; if you’re like me your instinct is to think that you’re right, you’re better. But there is a way of training ourselves to think of others as better. Pretend they are. You know they’re not really but just play the mind game; assume they are, just for argument’s sake. ‘Regard others as better than yourselves’. The funny thing is, when you pretend that for long enough you come to realise that’s it’s true. And that’s when we begin to see the world the Jesus way and it’s then that we begin to live out our calling.