

Vocation

Before 1430, from Latin 'vocare' [from which we also get 'vocal'... to call.... hence a spiritual calling....(calling from God)

The sense of one's ordinary occupation or profession is first recorded in English in 1553, perhaps influenced by that meaning of 'vocation' in Middle French.

Selected biblical passages

Note how 'calling' is both collective and individualised

Calling to Israel...

Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you....and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you (Genesis 12:1-3)

What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8)

I will hide my eyes from you even if you offer many prayers. I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood...seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow (Isaiah 1:17)

and to the prophets

Before I was born the Lord called me; from my birth he has made mention of my name. He made my mouth like a sharpened sword....I will make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation [note that 'salvation' is related to 'salv' or healing] to the ends of the earth (Isaiah 49:1)

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart. I appointed you as prophet to the nations (Jeremiah 1:5)

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor...etc (Isaiah 61)

and to Mary

I am the Lord's servant....let it be with me according to your Word (Luke 1:38)

and to Jesus...

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me [with the Spirit] to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour (Luke 4:18).

and to the first disciples

'Come, follow me', Jesus said (Matthew 3:19)

'as you go, preach this message, 'the kingdom of heaven is near...heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons...take nothing for the journey....I am sending you out like sheep among wolves.....do not be afraid...whoever finds his life will lose it and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it' (Matthew 10:16)

Your will be done on earth as in heaven (Matthew 6:10) [the 'Kingdom of God' is not another 'non-worldly place...rather, it is what the earth looks like when God's will is being fulfilled...a 'transformed earth']

and to the church...

As the Father has sent me, I am sending you....receive the Holy Spirit (John 20:21)

I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received....just as you were called to one hope when you were calledto each one of us grace has been given...[i.e. called to 'life in Christ', empowered for service by grace] (Ephesians 4)

To each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good...you[plural...the church collective] are the body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it....eagerly desire the greater gifts [Paul goes on to say that the greatest gift is love] (1 Corinthians 12-13)

Therefore I urge you, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices...we have different gifts according to the grace given us (Romans 12)

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave (Philippians 2:7)

For it is by grace that you have been saved through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Ephesians 2:8)

You see that his [Abraham's] faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did (James 2:22)

Discerning vocation

How do we discern how the general 'pattern' of life in Christ wants to take shape in us?

A few thoughts....

DO

- St. Ignatius, "The Discernment of Spirits". The purpose of life is to glorify God and be with God forever". In what way does my life bring glory to God (compared with glory to my ego)?
- Ignatius invites us to pay close attention to the movements of the Spirit in our hearts. Provided our goal is properly 'ordered' (i.e. directed towards Christ), when our lives are aligned with God's good intention for us, we will experience feelings of 'consolation' (delight; joy; peace; deep fulfilment). When we are moving away from God, we will experience feelings of desolation (emptiness; hollowness; dissatisfaction). So...on a daily basis we can do an examination of our inner state....where have I experienced consolation and desolation today? NB Consolation and Desolation are experienced at a much deeper level than happiness or sadness. Pray that God will help us to perceive the patterns of consolation and desolation in the various events in our life over a period of time. Are certain activities or events always associated with feelings of consolation? If so...keep doing those things.

"theologically and psychologically, our deepest desires are, I believe, indistinguishable from God's desires within us. The Holy Spirit prays in us – our love for God exists because God loves us first" (Gerald May)

- The desire of God within us is not the same as simply 'feeling good' about something. Ignatius spoke of 'disordered desire'. If our desire is for happiness rather than for God, then our 'desire' can become distorted. When this happens, a movement away from God can be accompanied by 'false consolation' (i.e. I 'feel good' when doing unhealthy things).

- Ask God for guidance and the gift of discernment. It can be helpful to seek out a wise Pastor or Spiritual Director – someone who will not give us the answer but will help us to discern the Spirit.
- Pray daily – such a discipline will inevitably result in the ego getting bored. Then stick with it so that God can start to edge around the boredom.
- Be attentive to ‘synchronicities’. This is where ‘patterns’ occur in otherwise random events. For example, someone recommends a book to us and then the title of the book appears in a movie we are watching on TV that night; and then again on a book shelf the next day when we are visiting the library. We wouldn’t necessarily make a major life decision on the basis of this, but it might not hurt us to read the book!
- Be open to feedback from others – about where other people perceive our gifts. But don’t be enslaved to the views of others. Plenty of people are willing give well intentioned advice about ‘you’d be good at this career’. It’s worth listening to and then also ultimately trusting the inner leading of the Spirit.
- Listen to dreams. The bible is full of stories of God’s callings coming through dreams. Don’t allow the ego to dismiss dreams as ‘random’ or ‘silly’. Write your dreams down, particularly recurring dreams. Dreams are one way in which God can get around the defensiveness and protectiveness of our egos.
- Retain humility. Believing with certainty that “God told me to do this” may well be an inflation of the ego. Remember Paul’s advice that we only ever “know in part” (2 Corinthians 12). Self martyrdom and apparently ‘good Christian works’ might be godly or they might just be ways of our ego puffing itself up.
- Welcome failure and inevitable humiliations – they are great opportunities to remember that our dignity and value come from the fact that God loves us, not from our successes or what other people think of us.
- Reflect on the ‘external criterion’ of the “Fruits of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22). Are my actions characterised by love?

DONT

- Don’t be put off by what we perceive our weaknesses to be. If God is calling, God can work through our weaknesses (Paul speaks about this. 2 Corinthians 12:9). Overly worrying about our weaknesses can simply be avoidance of the Spirit’s call.
- Don’t be overly inflated by our strengths and successes. Just because we are good at doing something doesn’t necessarily mean we are called to be doing it. Ego inflation can simply blind us to the ‘new thing’ that God wants to do through us.
- Don’t become paralysed by indecision. When in doubt, DO SOMETHING. Then pay attention to the consolations and desolations.
- Don’t worry about making a wrong decision. John V Taylor suggested that God doesn’t have one set-in-stone detailed plan for our life that we either get or don’t get. Rather, God is infinitely creative in bringing good out of whatever decisions we make....an infinitely adaptable plan!

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