

Called and Commissioned: Isaiah and the disciples

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How do we know God's call on our lives? Our readings this morning provide us with two examples of calling in the bible – the call of Isaiah and the call of the disciples. In some ways, very different examples of calling, but in other ways, with many things in common. Calling is a funny thing. My experience is that in our culture today, we tend to refer to calling in a religious context and usually with respect to people who are called into specific religious service or roles. Think vicar, nun or monk. Rarely do we hear a teacher speak about their calling, or a civil servant. And indeed, one could support that viewpoint with the readings today. Isaiah is a prophet, the disciples are – well, the disciples! They are called away from their trade as fishermen and tax collectors, to take up what we would now think of as 'ministry'. However, we must avoid the trap of assuming that calling is for a few. Calling in fact is for everyone. We are all called. And our job is to ensure that all believers in Jesus understand that unique call on each of their lives. So how can the examples in our readings today help us understand our own sense of calling?

Just briefly, I want to draw out some of the differences and similarities between the two encounters.

Let's look at the Isaiah passage. One thing that struck me was the way in which the calling is revealed to Isaiah. He has a revelation of the awe and majesty of God.

I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

*"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory."*

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.

I'm not surprised that Isaiah reacted in the way he did!

"Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"

There is a sense of the profound realisation of Isaiah's own humanity – his shortcomings, failings, weakness, humanness – compared with this *awesome* God – surrounded by the heavenly hosts waiting on him. Messages come via seraphs. No close encounter with God in this picture.

We are to understand that God is mighty and we are weak and sinful. Isaiah captures this well in his response. Yet God's reaction to Isaiah's 'confession' of sin and failure is not judgement or anger – but compassion and healing. In this picture language, a heavenly being is sent to Isaiah to touch his unclean lips with a burning coal – a sign of healing, restoration and forgiveness.

I once read an interview with Pope - Francis.

The American journalist who was interviewing him asked Pope Francis, "*who are you?*" The Pope said some things about his personality and then finished by saying, that ultimately, he is "a sinner, whom The Lord has looked upon."

Calling starts with an awareness of who we are and *how* we are. What is our condition? At the point when we first met with The Lord, we *were* sinners.

In the painting, the calling of Matthew by Carravagio, there is debate about who Matthew *is*. Is he the bearded man looking surprised by Jesus command to follow, or is it the young man sitting at the counting table, head bowed in a surly manner, not yet wanting to look at Jesus?

I like the fact that there is ambiguity, because in fact, all of those people in the painting are called by Jesus. But they present different states, different situations.

And this is what we see in our reading today. In the story about Isaiah, he is struck by an encounter of the awe and majesty of God. The *otherness* if you like.

The disciples on the other hand have a different experience. Early in his ministry, they have come to know Jesus. To work with him, eat with him, get to know him. They may have seen, heard or experienced things that have made them think he is a 'holy man'. Someone used by God.

It's a close encounter. Jesus is close to them. Close enough to touch, to talk to directly, maybe even to argue with. But at the point at which he performs this incredible miracle from their fishing boats– the disciples twig that he is something different. This is no ordinary teacher. And Peter's response?

But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"

Very similar to Isaiah.

When we encounter the living God, we also confront the reality of our own weakness, frailty and humanity. But what we learn from the readings today is that God's response is to use us – despite that.

Jesus' response?

"Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people."

Jesus' response is to commission Peter.

We may feel inadequate to partner with God in his activity in the world. But we all have our own unique calling. Being in a walk of faith with God, means that we are in that process of being renewed and transformed – more like the people that God intended us to be.

Isaiah's response is.... *Here I am; send me!* Despite his earlier proclamation of unworthiness, this encounter with God has left Isaiah in the position that, with God's help and by his grace, he can put himself forward for service.

Now Peter doesn't respond in this passage. BUT, we know that Peter most definitely responds to his call.

So, what about our response?

When I was exploring ordination there was much soul searching and a good deal of counting the cost. When reality hit, or I came across a stumbling block, I would tell myself I don't *have* to do it. Which is true.

I had very young children, I had an enjoyable and manageable job. Why would I want to embark on this crazy journey?

The person helping through the process agreed with me that I could indeed stop the process at any time. *But* she said, think about what you would miss.

Following Jesus is an adventure. But not an easy one. But then what adventure is easy? If it was easy, would it be an adventure?

We are **called**, we are **commissioned**, and we are **sent**. Just like those in history before us. No more, or less worthy than them, but equally open to the transforming love and grace of God.

Our response is to be open to that transforming love and grace of God and to the call of God in our lives.

Amen

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