

Vocation

One of the things I wanted to do on my sabbatical was to bring together two or three aspects of my life: my passion for the natural world, my Christian faith, and my service in the Church. It was important that I did something I enjoyed; but at the same time I wanted that to inform my knowledge of God (specifically my appreciation of God as creator) and to do something that might, in some small way, benefit the Church in the Diocese of Norwich – which is why I did some reading around the theology of evolution and why I concentrated on recording insects in churchyards. Nobody asked me to do that: that was me exercising my passion; and so it felt very different from what I do in my role as Rector – and so it should. When we take up a role or do a job, we may well be exercising some of our gifts, but we are also conforming to what the institution or project requires of us – and that will probably include things that we don't enjoy or feel particularly gifted in.

I've just had my cell group meeting: three of us who trained together for ordained ministry. Two of us are in conforming roles: one as a hospital chaplain and me in parish ministry. The third has done that (she has been both a prison and a hospice chaplain) but a few years ago she left and is now exercising her personal gifts by supporting others in structured ways, such as formal supervision, and exercising her creative potential in writing. What she does originates much more within her, rather than being dictated by the needs of an external organisation – it is lovely to see how liberating that has been for her. Yet many of the people she supports are engaged in ministry; I even heard her quoted from the pulpit when I went to Steve Oliver's Welcome Service at Gorleston – so she is still serving the Church.

That all influenced my reading of today's passage from Paul's letter to the Romans. Early on, Paul has something negative to say about conformity: [in the GNB] *Do not conform yourselves to the standards of the world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind. Then you will be able to know the will of God – what is good and is pleasing to him and is perfect.* Christians are not called to fit in with the ways of the world; but neither, Paul suggests, is Christian life about conforming to an alternative, godly set of standards (which was perhaps implied by the posting of the Ten Commandments at the front of our churches). Living in accordance with God's will needs to come from within: it needs to be our will as well, and so we should seek to allow God to shape our desires and attitudes, so they correspond with his. More than one of the Prayer Book collects are along those lines: two weeks ago it was *make [us] to ask such things as shall please you.* What that looks like will vary, for God has made us all wonderfully different – and that is what Paul goes on to say.

Yet when he writes about the varied gifts being exercised in the Christian communities of his day, he lists both things that come from within, and roles within the Church. Depending on the translation, there are those who *share with others* or *give*; and those who *shew mercy* or *are compassionate*: these are natural (or developed) inclinations, which come from within – demonstrated by generous or empathetic people. But Paul's list also includes those who teach, and those who *rule*, or *have authority*: yes, there are natural leaders and those with the desire and ability to share what they know with others; but nevertheless these are roles within the church: they have been given authority to lead or to teach, and that demands a certain degree of conformity.

I wouldn't think of that as undesirable: projects and organisations need that in order to function. If all the parish clergy and hospital chaplains only followed our natural inclinations, or all left our roles to pursue our individual callings, things would fall apart. Our parishes depend on lay people filling roles which may not fit your individual gifts like a glove, but are essential parts for the body to function.

That makes me think about the word *vocation* (or calling). The word seems to imply an external source: we hear someone or something else calling us. Yet it also has a strong internal sense: we speak of someone *finding their vocation*: something which fits well with their inclinations and gifts, the exercising of which brings a sense of fulfilment. Is it that correspondence between external requirement and internal motivation which is the key factor? Just as Paul urges us to seek the transformation of our minds, so that we may be aligned with the will of God?

There's a similar correspondence in today's Gospel reading: Peter is told that *whatever he prohibits (or binds) on earth will be prohibited in heaven, and what he permits (or looses) on earth will be permitted in heaven*. Surely that's the wrong way round? Shouldn't it be the heavenly rulings which direct the earthly ones? As in Matthew's Lord's Prayer: *thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven*? I guess it is the correspondence which is important: if Peter (and his successors?) are being given such breathtaking heavenly authority, it's all the more important that they act in accordance with God's intentions.

One consequence of my sabbatical is that, as I ask lay down my Rural Dean role, I'm accepting a request to become an Eco Chaplain in the Diocese. Some aspects of that will fully align with my passion for nature; others I'll need to get acquainted with. I'm not a natural campaigner, for example – but there are other Chaplains who are.

As you and I seek to serve God and the Church, allowing ourselves to be transformed by Christ, discovering and exercising our gifts, conforming to the needs of the Church, perhaps Paul's most useful phrase, picked up in this service of Holy Communion, is his opening one: *offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God / present your bodies a living sacrifice*. A sacrifice is an offering to God; in the case of the sacrifice of an animal, requiring its death. But we are to be *living sacrifices*: what we offer is not conformity with a prescribed ritual, but something that is alive within us, our inner vocation, which God has planted within us. Yet that we lay down in God's service and as our contribution to the life of the body, Christ's Church.