

Shaping the Church - Models of Ministry

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
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Today's first reading was read by Louise at my ordination to the priesthood. It is about the calling of Jeremiah, and a reminder to us all that God calls people for his purposes, and it is not a random act, but rather an event that is planned from the earliest stages of life. One of the difficult things about the priesthood is that it and the church do not fit the current models of the world. It is a struggle for most both before and after ordination to understand the distinction between calling and employment.

There are many clergy of the seventies and eighties who wanted to reduce the work of the ordained to a 9-5 job where we go to the office and work and then go home. The movement of rectories away from churches is symptomatic of this. In many dioceses, the ordained are requested to apply for positions vacant with a CV and be formally interviewed 'like a real job'. And the understanding is that the Rector is the CEO of the church organisation.

The church has been dazzled by the corporation model and we employ the hard-sell the soft-sell, the strategy-meeting and the recruitment programme rather than as we considered last week, Paul's visualisation of the church - as an organism, not an organisation. A group of people mutually bound together by the Holy Spirit. One Body. Paul's thinking is so much at odds with material coming out of America and the church growth movement.

It is my belief, that only when we restore the idea of calling and vocation that we will start to see our church recover its effectiveness not only in proclaiming the Gospel but also in the ministry to poor, the needy and the downtrodden.

Now I want to take this in several directions, but central to where we are going, is the idea that my calling is no different to anyone else's. Priesthood and the sacrament ministry that it entails is a part of the whole, described by Peter as the priesthood of all believers. We are all called to something. God has chosen each person here for one or more ministries. Mine is obvious, yours could be more subtle.

I remember the tremendous privilege in St James, taking communion to the shut ins. It was an amazing insight of the church at work. I was privileged to find out the invisible work of the saints visiting those who could not get out, helping with their shopping or other work around the house, or just visiting them. It was work not seen or talked about but God's work none the less. It was not structured or organised, it just happened as people made themselves available to respond to the needs that God would show them. Even to talk about it in terms of calling would embarrass these people, but this is what it was.

Calling is not necessary about being zapped by God to suddenly go up and down the main street of Minlaton with a Bible under your arm knocking on doors. Rather it is being so attuned to God that you notice the work that he wants to do and make it your own.

Now let us just think about models and structures in the church for a moment

As I alluded to earlier, there has been a great push over the past thirty years to shift us into corporate thinking. The diocese becomes head office, the Bishop the CEO, and the Diocesan Council - the Board. The rectors are like branch managers and parish councils are the local executives and people are the underlings. Decisions - like church closure come from the idea of rationalisation and the bottom line. The worth or otherwise of any part is determined by its profitability.

We are asked to provide financial returns and statistical returns but never have I been asked to describe the needs of the parish to the diocese. Often, the talk is can you pay my stipend and fix the rectory; not did you need my ministry. It is all very well for us to try and describe ourselves as a missionary diocese, but this will only be a reality when our focus is needs and not resources.

Don't misunderstand me. There are things that the corporate world can teach us, but we must take care not to adopt the values of a system that creates entities like Christopher Skase. As a former BHP employee it is amusing to be dragged into church programs that I did years ago in BHP, now Christianised and sold as the salvation of the church.

We are a generation, which has seen the pressure on the family farm model of agriculture, with profits going to the marketers and the franchises. And on both church and farm, we must ask the question is more efficient better?

The problem that comes through all this is a loss of understanding with how the church should operate. If my position is one of power and statutory authority, I have lost the plot. Clergy, and lay people have joined in the general malaise of society - more concern with rights rather than responsibilities.

And this is not new for Paul writes...

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

But do not have love - Paul repeats this phrase three times. He contrasts love with success. Do we boast of our achievements or our love...? When have you heard of any company executive praised for their love? I am called to love... You are called to love... and this is to be its quality:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

This should be our manifesto both as individuals and corporately. Love is not an optional extra, but the very currency of our operation. Without love, we cease to be that body that was described last week. We cease to be an organism and revert to being an organisation.

Not that I think that we are failures, but there is always the need to do better. It is so easy, to forget these principles and become just another organisation.

Jesus experienced difficulty in Nazareth, as this was his home town. When the people saw him, they could not get beyond the physical relationships of the past. He was to them Joseph's son - not the Son of God, something that needed to be received by them as by us as a matter of faith, and without faith the mission of the church fails.

I am aware of the imperfections in myself and in our Anglican church, but I believe in what we can become. We must see with the eyes of faith the vision for what the church really is and cease from trying to reduce it to worldly models. As we look to this vision, then together with faith we can look with expectation for God to be at work in our midst.

Let us see beyond the present, and not be sold an inadequate model. If we are to be called a Diocese. On a mission, let us make it happen here. Not through a changing of the external structures, but as people with a vision and expectation to see God meet the needs of those whom he has given us to minister to.

So let us together on this journey of faith ask God to bless our faith and multiply it in abundance and with expectation wait for God to act in our midst.

AMEN