

Volunteers

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

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Do you remember celebrating the year of the volunteer. Perhaps our Old Testament reading this morning would suggest that if anyone was looking a Patron Saint for volunteers, then Isaiah would be a prime candidate. "Here am I; send me!" he says in response to God's question.

I know as I look around, that many of you are involved in a wide range of volunteer organisations outside the church and many of you give many hours to our community to ensure that we have services. Indeed, if it were not for volunteers, many small communities like ours would not function at all.

It is our Christian perspective that helps us to volunteer, to serve others and our community, particularly at points of need. There are the unseen army of angels who care for our elderly and shut ins with little or no recognition of these things. It is just wonderful to see the church in action this way.

But there is a question that we must ask ourselves. "Many people outside the church also do these wonderful things, so what makes it Christian?" Or "is it Christian at all?"

Perhaps you might be surprised to know that I am not sure that we can call it Christian, although Christians are often particularly active in this sort of thing. Martin Luther discovered as he studied Scripture that Grace was a free gift from God and not something that could be earned by works of supererogation or good works. Eternal life comes from God's graciousness and not our merit - only our response to it.

I prefer to see the propensity of people to volunteer, to help others, is not a Christian thing, but rather a part of human nature itself. Humanity is made in the image of God - that is the essential message of **Genesis 1:27-28**, and in doing these 'good' things, we are reflecting this image of our Heavenly Father. Even the most damaged and unlikely human can engage in acts of what is to them, unnatural goodness, but it is part of their nature, all be it suppressed.

So, in the volunteer, we glimpse the image of the almighty in humanity. This is not to say that the volunteer is a perfect image but shows us the characteristics found in last week's reading from 1 Corinthians 13 about love.

So, in saying this, I think that the nature of the Christian faith and its moulding of people through the Holy Spirit to become more like Christ means that we as Christians are more likely to reflect God's image in all things. This is especially so when it comes to seeing and meeting the needs of others. Our willingness to help is an indication of our understanding of the very nature of God.

So, what about Isaiah?

Whereas we would like to see Isaiah as the archetype of volunteers, I think this is a result of confusion in the minds of many about the distinction between volunteering

and being called. Isaiah was called by God. God gave him the choice, but it was in response to a deliberate call.

Call or calling is a fundamental element of our faith. This is the distinction between the mainline and the fringe churches. Leadership is not a matter of getting volunteers but rather discerning the call of God on a person's life. In our Anglican System the call to ministry is identified by the individual and confirmed by the church. The process is cumbersome and slow but is meant to ensure the calling of the individual is certain and confirmed. We do not just hire a hall, put out a sign and say we are a church and God has called us to ministry. (Believe me, I have seen this done in a former parishes).

So when it comes to God's work it is not just the idea that we want to do it (to volunteer), but an assurance that God wants us to do it (to be called). One of the priestly functions is to help others discern this calling, to hear God's voice. So let us draw from Isaiah some insights into calling.

Let us just go over the story. Isaiah was in the temple (as he was a priest) and had an experience of God in his majesty. In his exposure to God, he experienced feelings of inadequacy and God ministered to his need and prepared him for service. God called him and he responded.

I see four elements in this:

- Encounter with God,
- Sense of inadequacy
- Equipping by God
- Call and Response

We cannot begin to think about serving God unless we have encountered him. For Isaiah, there was the spectacular, but the task was difficult, and this event would be an anchor when the going gets rough.

For many the **encounter with God** is more of a still small voice. God's presence is shown in his infinite activity in the small and mundane in as much as his great miracles. This is often a matter of perspective. We often do not see God acting, because we do not look for it. Our framework should be that of a partnership between God and us.

Answered prayer should be our regular experience and it is seeing the action of God in the chance encounter with those whom we should see or the opportunity that comes our way. Twice in the last month, I have come across a gentleman whom I need to visit but is difficult to catch at home. Once in a supermarket, and once in the hospital at the front desk. In each case, these were abnormal encounters, as I had not been doing the regular or normal thing. I cannot give any other explanation other than God had organised them for me. We cannot engage in God's work unless we have an awareness of God at work in the world.

Sense of inadequacy

Perhaps our modern world is not geared up for this feeling, but a true encounter with God will leave us with this sense of inadequacy - Think of Adam and Eve - we hid because we were naked, or Peter - get away from me for I am a sinful man. A true

encounter with the divine leaves us with a powerful sense of our own shortcomings. This is the gateway for us to begin to serve God, not with the attitude that suggests that we are doing him a favour, but with that humble heart of a servant.

Equipping by God

It is not in our strength, but with his enabling that we might be successful. We do nothing for God, other than make ourselves available for his ministry and mission. He gives us the skills and the talents and gifts us with spiritual gifts that we might do what is needed. We begin by being made whole, by being cleansed and purified and continue to find God at work in us - equipping us.

The final stage is **call and response**. God to a certain extent calls us to be active where we are, and so we minister in the school canteen or through the lodge or rotary or RSL. The absence of a discernible call from God is not an excuse for idleness because in Scripture he has described what we should do, how we should live etc.

But there is a time when we will find God calling us to something new. To something that is out of the ordinary. To a special mission. This may or may not mean using our own peculiar talents or being equipped completely for ministry by God's spirit. Often this call is to give up or put aside some of the things that we hold dear to free ourselves for God's service. Our response is a result of our encounter with God and asks no questions but takes for granted the God's call comes with God's equipping. This is faith par excellence, for our action comes from our understanding of who God is etc.

This does not stop us from volunteering, for this is a part of being a good citizen, but we should not confuse this with the idea of a call from God. Each of us is called by God. It is not up to me to tell you your call but rather to help you to hear it. It is a personal transaction between God and I, between you and God. It may come as a bolt from the blue or quietly through a gradual unease of the way things are and the looking for something more. And when it comes, you will know what to do.

So let us look to being a place of God's called (or chosen) for "The called-out ones" is meaning of the *ἐκκλησία* - (the Greek word for church). Let us, you and I, look for that place of discernment that we might hear God speaking. God has asked each of us: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" May we like Isaiah respond, "Here am I; send me!"

AMEN