

Preaching for the first time in Christ Church Oxford was a daunting experience. I looked around and there were several of the theologians whose books I had read and, in a few cases, even understood. The temptation was to pretend that I too was an academic theologian, and to spend hours reading so that I could write an erudite academic sermon. The expectation was that every preacher there would be an academic, so I would simply be fulfilling that belief. There was a part of me that really wanted to be respected for my intellectual rigour, to be thought of as equal to these great names. Thankfully common sense got the better of me and I realised that there were many in the congregation that might appreciate something simple that related to their own lives. I was not and am not called to be an academic theologian.

What we would like to be and how we would like to be regarded by other people are not always good guides to our behaviour. We have to be true to ourselves and true to our calling.

Sometimes that is uncomfortable, as illustrated by John the Baptist. He was asked ‘who are you?’

He was gaining celebrity status. People were flocking to hear him and be baptised. It would have been very easy for him to start to think, ‘maybe I am the Messiah, or if not that, then certainly a prophet’ – not deliberately misleading people, but by fulfilling people’s expectations, accidentally losing sight of his call.

Yet he was adamant.

‘I am not the Messiah.’

‘I am not Elijah or any other prophet.’

‘I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,  
“Make straight the way of the Lord”’,

He understood his calling and it was a difficult one. He was not a scholar. He was not a healer. Although crowds came to him, his task was not to keep them but to turn them towards Christ.

We don’t know if John was tempted to start his own cult, with crowds of followers who would hang on his every word. He clearly had the charisma. What we can infer is that he

tested his calling for authenticity. He did not abandon it because it brought no honour and few friends – his message was a harsh one.

Every person here has a calling from God, and that calling is to be the person God wants you to be and, as that person, to do what God wants you to do. Some of these things are generic. God wants every person to care about issues of justice, to be forgiving, to work for peace. But many are particular. Some are called to be single, others to be married. Some are called to issue challenges, to be the thorn in the side, others are called to be reconcilers. In those roles some will be reviled or hated, others will be loved and given Nobel prizes. Some will sink into obscurity, others will, for good or ill, be the subject of articles in the press. What matters is that we are true to our own personal calling.

St Paul says in his letter to the Thessalonians ‘Do not quench the Spirit’. But we do. And we do it not deliberately or maliciously, but because we don’t like what we are called to be and to do. We want to be liked. We want to be needed. In fact, if we are honest with ourselves, we would like to be loved and thought indispensable. I very much doubt if St Paul was much liked. He was given a really tough call by God, to challenge the religious hierarchies of his day to accept gentiles as believers in Christ. His temperament - argumentative, tough, non compromising - was perfect for this task. He could not have achieved it had he been meek and mild, always attempting to make friends and please people.

I cannot tell you what God wants from you and you alone . But I can tell you that like John the Baptist, like St Paul, like all of the apostles and disciples, he wants you to point away from yourself to Christ.

Perhaps this is the test that enables us to tell if something is truly God’s will for us. So often we point at ourselves. ‘Look at me!’. It isn’t necessarily ‘look at how wonderful I am’, it could be ‘look how much I do for others’ or ‘look how much I am hurting’ or ‘look how horrible everyone is to poor downtrodden little me’. We can kid ourselves this is humility and service. But if we are pointing at ourselves we are pointing in the wrong direction.

Everything we do needs to point towards Christ and away from ourselves, remembering that each little thing we do for any person, we do for Christ. Eventually we will learn to recognise Christ in the many faces around us.

It sounds hard, but with God all things are possible. He has called us and never asks us to do anything that is beyond our ability.

In the words of St Paul:

May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.  
<sup>24</sup>The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.