

Today is Vocation Sunday. We will shortly watch a short DVD presentation promoting the notion of the ordained ministry as a form of Vocation.

I want this morning to explore the notion of vocation under three headings. Firstly the notion of the sacred ministry as something we need to consider personally if we are of an age where that might be appropriate. Or as something we should consider encouraging others (who might be of such an age) to consider.

The second strand I want to touch on is how do we care for clergy who might be appointed to the cure of souls in this parish. And thirdly I want us to think about our own lives and what might be our vocation.

In the DVD we will hear a number of clergy reflecting on what vocation means to them. The gospel account documents the excitement with which the disciples reflected on their ministry experience.

Although not ordained in the way clergy are today the disciples were called and set apart by Jesus for their particular task. They were commissioned to proclaim repentance from sin, to cast out demons and anoint the sick.

Clergy are still called to “proclaim the good news of God’s love, so that many may be moved to faith and repentance,” and to minister “among the sick, the needy and all who are oppressed or in trouble.”

A vocation to the sacred ministry is a calling to walk in the footsteps of Jesus and his disciples. It’s a call to be God’s hands and feet in the world; to help form “a dwelling place for God”. As the writer of this morning’s epistle reading puts it.

Now if you are of an age to consider such a call then it is something that I would encourage you to do.

No one with a genuine call feels worthy. Moses argued that God had the wrong man; Samuel had to be convinced that God was speaking to him; the disciples needed the gift of the Holy Spirit to empower them in their ministry.

I was sure that I was mistaken when I felt that I was being called to the sacred ministry. I had little church experience before coming to faith and had been involved in the life of the church for a few short years.

That is where the selection process is so helpful because it is not just about the individual feeling or believing that they have a call. It's about the church of God, you and me individually and collectively through the Archbishop, the Director of discernment and the selection panel to confirm or reject a candidate's calling.

There is absolutely no shame in offering oneself for selection. All you are saying is that this sense

of call remains with you and you are wanting some help to understand what it means.

One of the questions I was asked was what I would do if the selection panel turned me down. I had no hesitation in saying that I would simply go back to doing what I had been doing.

What we need to be mindful of is that when we are thinking about encouraging a person to consider the sacred ministry is that we are not selecting the next rector of St Paul's Ipswich. What we are discerning is whether this person is open to God and to being formed by the Holy Spirit.

Rough diamonds can be polished. The first disciples were a mixed lot. Jesus himself was a carpenter; James and John were fishers, Matthew a tax collector, Luke a physician, Paul a rabbi. God calls all manner of people.

The first step is a conversation with me as the parish priest, then an invitation to a seekers day. If the person wishes to explore further there would be an ongoing relationship with the Director of discernment before a meeting with the selection panel.

If the selection panel recommends that the person commence training they would begin a formation period. This involves a course of study and ministry formation including a parish or sector placement and a discernment process.

It is a lengthy process in which the person is given every opportunity to be clear; in their heart and mind that this is what God wants them to do. At the same time the church is assessing the person's giftedness and suitability for ministry.

By the time a person arrives in a ministry setting both they and the church have invested a great deal of time and effort into the discernment of their vocation and its formation. It is in the

interest of both that ministry settings are suited to the giftedness of the priest or deacon concerned, that ministry settings are well served with well trained, competent clergy and that parishes and other mission agencies provide adequate support and care for their clergy.

The Diocesan Action Plan has as one of its goals the following:

We are going to improve the wellbeing and capability of our volunteer and paid workforce by training, empowering and resourcing them to share in God's mission in Southern Queensland.

At synod a draft framework to support a flourishing clergy was presented. It has three pillars: Care, Grow and Renew. Care involves programs and resources to support and enable self-care. Grow involves planned spiritual, personal and professional development. Renew involves opportunities for reflection and renewal,

including a structured and reflective conversation focused on the wellbeing of the individual.

Parishes and Ministry settings would do well to work with clergy to ensure that the aspirations of the Mission Action Plan and the Care Program are being utilized.

So how does this notion of vocation impact on you and me? When I am not at St Paul's I am a retired priest who attends worship at my parish church. My wife and I contribute as best we are able to the life of that faith community.

We look out for newcomers to the parish, try to engage them in conversation and help them meet others, especially those we think might share a common interest.

Like the disciples in the gospel we spend time drawing aside to reflect on our spiritual lives and attempt to gain insight into where God might be leading us individually and as a couple. There are

many demands on our time and like the disciples we can find little time for leisure and to eat.

We find we need to plan carefully so that we can be involved in the areas of ministry we feel called to (such as the parish of Ipswich for me), that we have time for family, friends and get to do the things retired people do.

Vocation for most of us means looking at our God given gifts and prayerfully considering how God might want us to employ them. Drawing aside to a quiet place as Jesus and the disciples did is helpful as it allows us to reflect intentionally.

Most of us find it easier to see where God has been active in our past than to see what God wants us to do in the future. When we allow ourselves to be open to the Holy Spirit we can be amazed at what God is able to do through us.

God is just as likely to be present to us and others at the kitchen sink, or in the lunch room at work as

here in church. Our vocation as the people of God is to be godly people. As the letter to the Ephesians puts it we are to grow into “a holy temple in the Lord” “a dwelling place for God”.

Vocation Sunday therefore is an opportunity to think about the sacred ministry and whether we or someone we know might consider attending a seekers day. We have also thought about how we as the Anglican Church Southern Queensland care for our volunteers and paid staff as well as the clergy. And we have thought about how God might want us to deploy our giftedness.

Owen Strong

Locum Priest.