

John 12:28-36

The readings set for this service today speak of God's call. In the Old Testament reading, we hear Isaiah say, "The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb, he named me." He may well have been speaking of his own call here to bring restoration to Israel and the surrounding nations. But as so often happens in prophetic oracles, here Isaiah also foreshadows Christ's call from God to redeem both Israel and the Gentiles through his death and resurrection.

The life of a prophet was always a tough call - and we know that Isaiah's life was no exception. He met a rather grisly end.

The Gospel reading begins with an encounter between the disciples and some Greeks - or Gentiles - who ask to speak with Jesus. It seems that this encounter is something of a catalyst for Jesus. It underlines for him that his call to the cross is a big deal, because it's not only for the Jews, it's for the whole world.

'This is it,' says Jesus. 'It's happening.....the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.' He then speaks metaphorically of his coming death - that, like a grain of wheat, he must die in order to bear the fruit the Father has called him to produce.

Last Sunday, Passion or Palm Sunday, we reflected on the ultimate sacrifice Jesus made to fulfil the call of God. In verses 31 & 32 of today's reading, Jesus speaks of the fruit that would come from that sacrifice:

"Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

If I look at this passage from John reflectively, thinking about what it means to be called by God, I find it both sobering and encouraging.

Sacrifice

The sobering part is that to be called by God into his kingdom will always involve **sacrifice**. At the very least, our daily sacrifice is to offer ourselves up to God, loving him with every fibre of our being, and then loving others as much as we love ourselves. That will mean denying our earthly desires on a regular basis, as we yield to the Spirit's prompting to live in as disciples of Christ.

At the other end of the scale, we, like countless disciples before us, may be called to sacrifice our lives entirely. A figure I came across recently said that more than 90,000 Christians died for their faith in 2016 - and that's the ones that were reported. That's one Christian killed every 6 minutes.

Even Jesus - the Son of God - found his call difficult. In v.27 he says "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour."

He was finding it tough. But he kept going. Gethsemane of course was the ultimate struggle. Jesus *really* didn't want to face the cross. He agonised in prayer all through the night - but he knew that this was what the Father was asking of him, and how much was at stake, so he obeyed.

The sobering part of being called to follow Jesus is that it will involve sacrifice. Always.

The clergy here will know what I mean when I say that sometimes, ministry can be a tough call. We can find it hard to keep going. The pace of ministry can be relentless. We can become spiritually, mentally and physically worn out. There can be disappointments and discouragements. It's not always easy.

Those of us who serve our Lord in any number of ways can experience the same thing. Living for Jesus in a secular culture can often be a strain. Remaining faithful to Christ in a non-Christian environment, or as a member of a non-Christian family can be stressful; doing what we can to bring about justice and equity, and even being part of an active and growing church - can be exhausting. And sometimes, just holding on to our faith in the midst of grief or despair can be the most difficult thing of all.

Joy

But it's not all doom and gloom is it? Because the other side of that coin is the joy of the Lord! That joy we experience when we receive a touch from the Holy Spirit to encourage us on our journey. God does that. Often.

He did it for Jesus in our reading today. God spoke audibly, and once again affirmed Jesus in what he was doing. At Gethsemane, an angel came and strengthened him. God was upholding and supporting Jesus through the trials ahead.

I was encouraged on Sunday afternoon after church. Everyone else had left and I was packing up my gear. A visitor to the service had lingered and so we got chatting. She was a deeply committed Christian woman, who was feeling called to a particular ministry, and was considering doing some theological study.

We had an opportunity to swap stories, and share our journeys. She had some struggles, and I think found it helpful to talk about them. As she left, she told me that she had been really encouraged. That made two of us.

I'm encouraged every time God provides an opportunity to talk to someone about their faith - and over the moon when someone enters the kingdom! I'm encouraged when I see people discovering their gifts, and growing in their walk with God. I'm encouraged when I see our community of faith here living sacrificial lives, serving each other willingly, and getting out there and making a difference in the community. Personally, I'm encouraged whenever God taps me on the shoulder and speaks to me! It's awesome!

So there it is. Responding to God's call will always involve sacrifice. There's no avoiding that. But responding to that call - whatever shape it takes - will also be the most rewarding and fulfilling thing we can ever do.

I find that God usually calls us to something he has already wired us for. He plants a passion deep in our spirits - and then, if we are open to his leading, he fulfills that passion in what he calls us to do. How good is that?

I love this quote by Friedrich Buchner, from his book "Wishful Thinking." He says, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

It may be tough going at times, but there is no better place to be.

Can we pray together the collect for today?