

# St Chad's College Chapel, Durham

Pontus Bramberg

5th Sunday after the Epiphany, AD 2022

May I speak in the name of God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen.

When we talk of the disciples of Christ it is easy to think of the Apostles, or maybe the larger group who followed Him in His earthly life. This is much too narrow a viewpoint; throughout history and to this very day the Lord calls each and everyone of us to be disciples, but what is discipleship? The literal meaning of the word disciple is learner or student, but a disciple is not the same as, for instance, a university student. A student is only expected to learn from their professor in a particular subject matter. A disciple, on the other hand, goes further than this: they imitate the teacher's way of life. The disciples didn't simply listen to our Lord teaching in the synagogues, they followed Him, ate with Him, prayed with Him.

How then can we be disciples of Christ today, almost two thousand years later in a very different world? The essence has not changed, we need to love God with all our hearts and our neighbour as ourselves. Another aspect of discipleship is vocation, and this is exactly what is demonstrated in today's Gospel, where Christ calls his first disciples. Just as those first disciples, each and everyone of us has a calling. First and foremost a general call to holiness, which applies equally to all of us, to welcome the Lord into our lives and to imitate Him in our doings. Second, we each have a specific personal vocation within the life of the Church. When we speak of vocation it is easy to fixate on vocations to ordained ministry or to monastic and other forms of religious life. While these are genuine examples of vocations we must also recognise that by no means all of us are called to either of these states and that clergy or monastics are not inherently more holy than lay people. Other examples from the tradition of the Church are marriage and various forms of lay ministry but even this does not cover all bases. What we all need to do is discern what God is calling us to do, and we need to do this both prayerfully and intellectually. Prayer is essential and the most direct way of understanding God's will but we also need to think about what is suitable for our own lives, because God, who knows us better than we know ourselves, does not call us to a vocation which does not work for us. This process of discernment can take years and in some sense will continue throughout life but it is worth going through because it is only in living out our calling that we can truly be disciples of Christ.

In fact, the discernment of vocation is not even reserved to practising Christians. While it is true that some vocations require an active and personal faith in Christ, it is equally true that the discernment of vocation can be important in leading to that faith. Indeed there are vocations that can be lived by those who do not profess the Christian faith at all; as an example nobody would deny that non-Christian parents are called to parenthood

on account of their lack of Christian faith. It is this universality of vocation that is so important to grasp. Every single person is individually called by God, not just clergy, not just Christians even, but everyone. What we can do is be open to this calling and let God guide us to where He knows we should be.

But what callings are there? The full answer is probably that there are as many as there are people, since we are each called in a unique way and in many cases to more than one of the traditionally named vocations and to other vocations that haven't been named. There is for example no contradiction in being called both to priestly ministry and to marriage and often parenthood. All three can be called vocations in their own right but it is only when joined together and maybe with other vocations that they make up the whole calling of a person. God calls us uniquely and as individuals; every vocation is equally valuable and some of us are called in more ways than one or in ways that don't fit neatly into one category.

An example of a person with a very unique vocation is Her Majesty the Queen, who celebrates seventy years on the throne on this very day (although most celebrations are planned later in the year). Apart from being our Sovereign, she is also a mother and, until the recent and tragic death of the Duke of Edinburgh, a wife. We might not directly think of monarchy as a calling but the coronation service and what we know of Her Majesty's personal faith certainly show an understanding of her reign as a vocation. In the coronation service the Queen was anointed by the Archbishop of Canterbury on forehead, hands, and breast while Händel's beautiful anthem, which I shall not attempt to sing, was sung. The text of the anthem, derived from the First Book of Kings, however is "Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet anointed Solomon king. And all the people rejoiced and said: God save the King! Long live the King! God save the King! May the King live forever. Amen. Hallelujah".

Anointing with holy oil is a practice attested to in the Old Testament for the consecration of priests, prophets, kings, and sacred objects, carried forward in the Christian tradition as a common practice mainly connected with Baptism, Confirmation, Ordination, and of course the Anointing of the Sick. While anointing is not essential for all of these actions it is nevertheless an important and ancient tradition which recalls the practice of the Old Testament and, crucially, reminds us of the Anointed One, the Messiah, the Christ. Jesus is anointed, both spiritually by the Holy Spirit at His baptism but also literally by Mary of Bethany. This anointing symbolises the supreme calling of Christ Himself, to be at once priest, victim, prophet, and king; as a priest and victim He sacrifices Himself as a singular sufficient sacrifice to fulfil and replace the numerous sacrifices performed in the temple, as prophet He preaches the Gospel of Salvation to Israel and the whole world, and He rules over the world as a righteous, merciful, and all-powerful king. In the Old Testament anointing is the outward sign of being set apart for a sacred purpose; this remains true in the Christian tradition and this setting apart is only possible through a calling from God.

While none of us have the high vocation of Christ Himself and the vast majority of us are not called to be monarchs like the Queen, they both are examples of unique callings and combination of multiple callings into one. Christ fulfilled the fullness of His vocation, even to the point of His death on the Cross. While we might not be able to account for every possible vocation one thing is clear: as Christians our primary vocation is to discipleship, to follow and imitate our Lord. Sometimes following Him means picking up

our own cross and carrying it but in the end we can only reach true spiritual joy and peace through Him. Each of us must discern our vocation in our own hearts, trusting in God, but often it can be useful to turn to someone else for advice, such as a member of the clergy or a lay minister but it could also be a trusted friend. Sometimes a vocation is visible to others before it is shown to ourselves.

So take this with you when you leave chapel today: Whoever you are and whatever your faith, you are called by God; this calling is individual and unique to you.

Amen.