

A Service for Vocations Sunday

Opening responses

Generous God, we come to worship,
each with our own gifts to offer to you and to one another.
Hear our songs and words of praise:
as we bless your name.

We come to worship, each with our own concerns
to offer to you and to share with one another.
Hear our silence and our intercessions:
as we bless your name.

We come to worship, each with our own faith
to offer to you and to strengthen one another.
Hear our passion and our prayerfulness:
as we bless your name.

Hymn StF 3 *Eternal God, your love's tremendous glory*

Approach

Gracious and generous God,
your love is the world's true sun,
ever rising and never setting.
Your life-giving warmth engenders, nourishes
and gladdens all things in heaven and earth.
For your shining in our lives and scattering the darkness,
we bless and honour you.
In Christ, you show forth the blaze of self-giving love,
which sets us free from stumbling in the dark,
and by your Spirit
you strengthen us to walk as those
who are native to the light,
and call us to love and serve you.
We offer you our wonder and praise;
through Jesus Christ our Saviour. **Amen.**

Confession

Merciful God,
you made us in your image,
with a mind to know you,
a heart to love you,
and a will to serve you.

But our knowledge is imperfect,
our love inconstant,
our obedience incomplete.
Day by day we fail to grow into your likeness;
yet you are patient with your people.
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,
do not hold our sins against us,
but in your tender love forgive.

Silence

The Almighty and most merciful God
grant you pardon and remission of all your sins,
time for true repentance
and amendment of life,
and the grace and comfort of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

Collect

Eternal Father,
at the Baptism of Jesus
you revealed him to be your Son
and anointed him with the Holy Spirit.
Keep all who are born of water and the Spirit
faithful to their calling as your people;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Hymn StF 513 *Take this moment, time and space*

Old Testament reading

Isaiah 43: 1–7

Psalm 29 (StF 807) [optional]

New Testament reading

Luke 3: 15–17, 21–22

Hymn StF 369 *Baptise us with your Spirit*

Sermon

“The of vocation in the Bible tends to the dramatic—or even the melodramatic. There is Moses’ call on Mount Horeb where *the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush* (Exodus 3: 2). There is Isaiah’s call: the voice of the Lord says, ‘*Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?*’; and the prophet says, ‘*Here am I: send me!*’ (Isaiah 6: 8). There is Mary’s call mediated through the angel Gabriel and her response: ‘*Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word*’ (Luke 1: 38). And there is Paul’s call on the road to Damascus, with its complicated back story. A voice says to him, ‘*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?*’; and the apostle-to-be says, ‘*Who are you, Lord?*’ (Acts 9: 4–5). There are some common threads to these well-known accounts: the voices, the fire, the light. In these

very personal dramas, there are plenty of special effects, but no clear script—at least not at this initial stage.

“According to the Letter to the Hebrews, *It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God* (Hebrews 10: 31). Conventionally, we understand vocation to mean that God has decided, we may struggle or resist, but there is a clear expression of God’s will, and God’s will has to be done, whatever the cost. The clay doesn’t argue with the potter (Isaiah 45: 9). At the same time, we are trying to discern the will of God and to distinguish it from what may not be the will of God: that dilemma lies at the heart of the way in which the Church seeks to test God’s call to any individual—and what the nature of that call may be.

“Scripture is less tentative. Our Gospel reading from Luke tells us about Jesus’ baptism, the pivotal experience that marks the beginning of his public ministry. He understands it against the background of the ministry of John the Baptist who says to the people:

‘I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.’

Luke 3: 16

“And he describes Jesus’ own baptism in dramatic fashion:

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased’.

Luke 3: 21–2

“High drama here—and rightly so. Because the next time the heavens are rent, we are on Calvary’s hill when darkness fell over the land, and the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom (Luke 23: 44–5).

“Luke tells the story of Jesus’ baptism with great economy: a meeting between Jesus and John the Baptist; immersion in the River Jordan; an anointing with the Holy Spirit; and the voice of God naming and calling.

“But why did Jesus allow John the Baptist to baptize him at all? After all, so far as we know, Jesus did not baptize anyone. The story about Jesus’ baptism is one in which he identifies with our humanity. John the Baptist, you will recall, was exercising a ministry calling men and women to repentance—to a change of direction in their life—and he invited them to signal publicly this change of heart and mind by baptism in the waters of the River Jordan. In undergoing this symbolic rite for himself, Jesus identified himself with those men and women. It was his way of identifying his humanity with our humanity.

“Those with an interest in Christian spirituality often talk in terms of what they call the ‘second journey’. A classic case in Methodism is John Wesley himself who was only 35 when he underwent that experience of God’s assurance in his life on 24 May 1738.

“Psychotherapists and counsellors come across the same sort of thing: in a popular phrase, we call it ‘the midlife crisis’. It’s about real people with real needs who find that they have to face not only a crisis of identity, but also of vocation. The story of Jesus’ baptism is about several things; it is certainly about vocation. What is my life about? Is my job/career the right one? Have I come to terms with the real me? Can I take hold of my life in some way and change direction in a healing and creative way?

“We know from the rest of the Gospel story that beyond Jesus’ midlife crisis, his second journey was extraordinarily productive and creative . . . liberating, even if initially painful. Now of course the Gospel writers were not twenty-first-century psychotherapists, so they didn’t think or write in that way; but even they can convey that Jesus’ baptism was an example of trauma.

“There can be a great deal of pain and readjustment connected with the second journey; but here we have a message of encouragement: that God is present even in trauma, dislocation and reorientation. Jesus had to handle the knowledge of a terrible vocation, but he lived with it creatively and faithfully.

“First, baptism is about Jesus’ identification with our humanity. Secondly, baptism is about the mystery of human life itself. The sacraments of the Church are about symbols, and through them there is often a richness and depth which words alone cannot fathom. This is why people who otherwise have no link with our churches bring their children for baptism. It would be presumptuous to write this off simply as folk religion or superstition. There is a deeply felt need to hallow new life and to give the rhythms of human life a sanctity and a special quality.

“At the heart of the symbolism is water—itself essential for life and health and growth. Jesus plunged down into the waters of the Jordan . . . and came up gasping and spluttering for breath. Very dramatic. This is an image of birth itself: the mystery and miracle of new life. As Mary was delivered of her son, as any mother gives birth to a child, so the waters of the womb are broken, and new life struggles into the world, gasping and spluttering for breath. This is the greatest trauma, the act that separates us from the security of our mother’s womb and into an uncomprehending and often hostile world.

“So, baptism is about entry into new life. Or rather, it’s about dying to the old and rising to the new: Jesus’ descent into the waters of the Jordan being a rehearsal of Good Friday; and his breaking the surface of the waters pointing forwards to Easter Day: the death of self and the resurrection to new life called to selflessness in him. Baptism expresses the truth of crucifixion and resurrection—a daily dying with Christ so that we may rise with him (Romans 6: 3–11).

“Thirdly, along with a sacramental sense of the mystery of human life, baptism is about our calling, our vocation. In our Old Testament reading, Second Isaiah speaks powerfully to us, as he spoke to the Israelites exiled and traumatized in faraway Babylon:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm

you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.

Isaiah 43: 1b–2

“It’s important to remember that in the Old Testament *calling* and *creating* are closely linked. Take a look at Isaiah 40: 26 where the text tells us that God creates the stars and calls them by name; and at Genesis 2 where Adam gives a name to all the living creatures that God has made; and then be thankful for the names our parents gave us when they brought us for baptism. There is deep affirmation here, but also the strong sense that God is acting purposefully for human beings, acting with the result he intends, acting in a wholly unexpected way.

“It is the initiating activity of God which is important here. And we have to hold onto that in our thinking about what baptism *is* and what it *does*. We can see in Jesus’ baptism an identification with our humanity; we can reflect on the symbolism of baptism and how it chimes in with our deep psychological needs. But we need to add to those insights that in baptism what matters is what God does. That is why baptism is unrepeatable; that is why it is not about any quality or disposition in us. It is about God’s initiative, God’s activity.

“In baptism, the words, symbolism and actions tell us that we are celebrating the gracious, welcoming, accepting love of God. That welcome is without reserve or qualification; it may perhaps seem wholly unexpected or inappropriate to us. Membership of the Church in reality begins there. Getting a class ticket is secondary. But if we give thanks to God for the gift of our baptism, what is it for?

“Just as the Holy Spirit brooded over the waters of chaos in the story of creation in Genesis 1, so the Holy Spirit, like a dove, hovered over Jesus in the waters of the Jordan; and then an anointing with the Holy Spirit who liberates the gifts, talents and graces of God’s people; and then that divine calling:

‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased’.

Luke 3: 22

“Jesus’ baptism sets the seal on his calling, his vocation. The voice of God calls.

“What is your calling? Perhaps you don’t think you have one, that vocation is a fancy word only used about ministers, or teachers, nurses and doctors; that other careers and jobs are not vocational. Not true. For a baptized Christian to exercise a vocation in secular employment and to be a witness to the transforming power of the gospel is arguably a tougher way of embodying what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

“‘I have been baptized!’ cried Martin Luther, the great German Reformer. It was a cry from the heart. Surrounded by opponents, beset by misunderstanding and, admittedly, of a depressive cast of mind, those words represented the bottom line. Whatever else happened, ‘I have been baptized!’

“If you say, ‘I have been baptized!’ then you, too, have been called. You have a calling to fulfil . . . and possibly a second journey to travel; you reflect the likeness of Christ—some combination of all those things perhaps. Today may be the time to begin to discover what your vocation is. **Amen.**”

Hymn StF 662 *Have you heard God’s voice; has your heart been stirred?*

Thanksgiving

Creator God, we thank you for the earth
and the wonder of its life:
the beauty of landscape, sky and seasons;
the variety of animals and plants
with their intricate interdependence;
and for making us your partners in creation.

Redeemer God, we thank you for Jesus Christ
and the glory of your work in him:
his life in all its fullness of being and doing;
his commitment to your way to the end;
for your raising him and us who follow him to new life.

Inspirer God, we thank you for human history
and the richness of our inheritance:
the heights of human artistry
and the depths of human understanding.
You come to us by your transforming Spirit
and renew us and all your creation.

Generous and bountiful God,
all good things come from you,
and from our hearts we thank you;
in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Prayers of intercession

Our Father in heaven . . . Great and gracious God, Father and Mother of us all, source of all life and love, recreate within each of us your divine image day by day. Assure us that we are loved eternally and without condition. Gently make your claim upon our lives, and call us to love and serve you. May the wonder of your creation inspire us continually. We pray for . . .

Almighty God, you have created the heavens and the earth and formed us in your own image. Teach us to discern your hand in all your works, and to serve you with reverence and thanksgiving; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, supreme over all creation, now and for ever. **Amen.**

Hallowed be your name . . . Touch us with an awareness of your presence in the hidden things and in the least of our sisters and brothers, that in them we may recognize your Name and hear the echo of our own. Help us to discern the signs of the times and to respond in faith, hope and love wherever you lead us. We pray for . . .

God of all power and might, the author and giver of all good things, graft in our hearts the love of your name, increase in us true religion, nourish in us all goodness and of your great mercy keep us in the same; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Give us today our daily bread . . . We thank you for our creation, preservation and all the blessings of this life—not only for ourselves, but for all those with whom we do not share bread and with whom our communion around your table is incomplete. We pray for all those for whom the search for bread today is a constant struggle and who dread the uncertainties of tomorrow. We pray for . . .

Lord and giver of life, you alone nourish and sustain your people, through Christ the bread of life. Feed our hunger and quench our thirst, that we may longer work for what fails to satisfy, but do what you require, in obedience and faith, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us . . . There is in all of us the capacity for greatness, but it is marred and wounded by selfishness and fear. Hatred is as powerful a force as love, and self-hatred can corrode us from within. In personal relationships, in our common life, in the political and international dimensions of our world, release us, we pray, from past failures and give us courage to see and practise new possibilities that sustain and promote life. We pray for . . .

Generous God, you gather your people and lavish gifts upon us, day by day. Grant that each experience of your pardon may enlarge our own love until it meets the measure of your extravagant forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil . . . The test—the time of trial—is that we do not deny your reality and your truth. Your call to us is persistent but gentle: to have faith, to follow, to live with the optimism of grace, to learn obedience, to trust when all seems beyond hope. Support us through times of doubt and absence into the light of your presence and joy. We pray for . . .

Merciful God, you have prepared for those who love you such good things as pass our understanding. Pour into our hearts such love towards you that we, loving you above all things, may obtain your promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your Name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,**

on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power
and the glory are yours,
now and for ever. Amen.

Offering and Prayer at the Offering

Hymn StF 564 *O thou who camest from above*

Closing responses

We will not offer to the Lord
Offerings that cost us nothing.

Go in peace, to love and serve the Lord.
We will seek peace and pursue it.

Glory to the Father and to the Son and
to the Holy Spirit:
**as it was in the beginning,
is now and shall be for ever. Amen.**