



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

The readiness to serve

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1 Samuel 3:10

"The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

This Sunday at Wesley Mission, we acknowledge with appreciation the place of individuals who are volunteers in our work. Over 4,000 people actively involve themselves in volunteering across Wesley Mission week by week. The wide variety of expressions of volunteering is seen in:

- Preparing for worship and serving congregations
- Mentoring young people and caring for children
- Helping run cafés in aged care facilities and helping the homeless
- Assisting in local centre auditing and other administrative support to make our services more effective
- Some volunteering is carried out with regularity, whilst other patterns are much more occasional

Vocation is clearly understood in the Christian context and so active volunteering flows naturally from our core values and is related to but not necessarily the same as call! In volunteering, we identify that we can make a lasting difference by offering ourselves to an area of work which we see emerge—or others help us to see—and, most important of all, we recognise we can step into the breach.

Since the Reformation, there has been a resistance to all 'dualism' which separates God's work from our daily lives in an unhelpful way. The New Testament never sees secular occupation as vocation, but certainly sees all that we do as the context and setting for living out our faith. God calls us to do everything we can day by day as a response to Christ and his kingdom. (see 1 Cor. 7:20)

A most graphic picture is painted for us in the Old Testament call of God to Samuel in the temple. At a time when it was rare for people to see visions or hear God's voice, it would hardly be surprising if a young boy mistook God's voice for that of Eli's. God's persistence is emphasised in the passage, as well as the strong link between our actions and how they impact on the wider world.

The call of Samuel demonstrates the passing from childhood to adult life but, in Samuel's context, this is far more significant, as we understand his call to be a prophet.

- Until now he appears rather passive, but emerges as a prophet
- His priestly functions are now to be directed in a prophetic call
- Responding to the call of God for Samuel, and for us, requires action and recognition of what lies ahead

In the familiar story of the call of Samuel, a good deal of attention is given to the boy's experience—but we must not miss the fact that this is actually about the call of God. This occurs while Samuel is keeping vigil beside or close to the Ark of God. He reveals his innocence in mistaking the voice of God for that of his old friend—and it is in this setting that we hear his simple affirmation of trust.

Text: "Speak, for your servant is listening."
(1 Samuel 3:10)

Many books and articles have been written on the theme of God's calling in our lives. For every individual, there is a sense of mystery about the call which is then confirmed in the practical circumstances of a person's life.

Samuel received his calling through an audible voice, even if at first he did not recognise its source. The message he was to receive had all the power of what Joyce Baldwin called "the direct force of truth" to which she concluded, "but final verification that he had heard the voice of God came only later, when events vindicated God's word."

- It would test his strength
- It would challenge his resolve
- It would prove his character

The theme of responding to God's call in various ways is replicated throughout scripture and in the story of the church.

Walter Brueggemann draws attention to the fact that this 'innocent-looking narrative functions in the context of a serious struggle for power'. We must ensure we don't retain an idyllic childlike picture when in fact the outcome is anything but idyllic or childlike. Our text, however, does invite us to explore the nature of our voluntary work, in which all of us are involved. Those who work within the confines of church life or in this great Mission enterprise are also engaged in those things which are over and above paid employment.

John Henry Newman was aware of God's call in his own life, but wrote in such a way that gave people access to his wisdom in considering their own vocation in life:

"God has created me to do him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which has not been committed to another. I have my mission. I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next.

"I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. He has not created me for naught. I shall do good. I shall do his work. I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place while not intending it—if I do but keep his commandments."

We must never forget that we are called to live daily as a vocation from God, offering ourselves to do good. To be alongside others in their need is a perfectly reasonable way to respond to God's purposes.

The spirit of volunteering is willingness

Samuel's credibility as a prophet does not lie in any conventional method—ie political or religious confirmation—but is to be found in his willingness to respond to God's voice. This willingness can be seen in different ways:

- The classical call of the Christian or preacher.
- The call of need and the position of circumstances.

- The stirring of a desire to complete our lives in offering ourselves for others.

The recent bushfires demonstrated once again how important it is to be willing to put down the priorities of the present for the greater priorities of human need. I am proud that so many of our people were involved.

The changing patterns of employment, the longevity of people's lives and, most importantly today, the recognition by increasing numbers of employers that opportunities of volunteering enhances the work experience and perhaps even performance, have each contributed to a new emphasis on volunteering.

Volunteering is ordinary people making an extraordinary contribution. It wasn't too long ago that I heard someone talking about company volunteering and referring to its positive contribution. As I look at it, it is a threefold win—for the individual, for the company and significantly for the community.

Today we are talking more and more about social capital. I have been exploring with a group of people regarding an event in 2014 here in Australia which is to explore just this theme.

Our main concern must be to see what a person does, rather than what a person gets, as the real measurement of citizenship. If we consider the contribution that is made each day across our lovely country by volunteers—in committees, working bees, school support and so on - we begin to grasp just how significant volunteering is in constituting what it means for us to be a community.

Volunteering can add quality to our lives. There is the story of an older woman who walked up to a little old man in a rocking chair on his deck. Though he looked weathered and feeble, he had a content smile on his face. She asked him, "What's the secret for a happy life?" His response was "Well, I smoke three packs of cigarettes a day and I drink a case of whisky a week, eat all fatty foods and never exercise." "That's amazing!" said the woman. "So, how old are you?" "Twenty-six!" he replied.

At least one factor that builds a healthy life is looking out for others and contributing to the community around us.

Jesus was no solo performer, even though he was and is the unique Son of God. His first course of action upon entering his own active ministry was to gather a community of faithful disciples around him. We are called to build a community by drawing others into the task with us.

To achieve this, we need a spirit of willingness. Our Wesley Mission story could not be told without reference to the auxiliaries, support groups and teams that have seen the transformation of our work as a whole—and specific projects in particular. For all this to have been achieved required willing spirits, softened by God's love.

The heart of volunteering is generous

In a different setting, I remember receiving a call from someone who asked the question of me, "I just wanted to check out what the expenses are for volunteering!" I have the feeling that they didn't really grasp the heart of this work:

- which is generous because of having received generously
- which is generous because need releases our grasp on things
- which is generous because we find ourselves fulfilled in doing this.

The work we do could not be achieved without all of us committing ourselves from the heart to the task of volunteering.

There is a legend which has a strong message for all. It concerns the boy who gave his five barley loaves and two small fishes, so that Jesus could feed the multitude. It tells how he hurried home after the event. The wonderful miracle kept running through his mind, made even richer by the fact that afterwards all the fragments had been gathered and amounted to more than they started with. He told his mother all about the exciting incident.

With eyes still big with wonder, he told how his five little barley cakes and two dried fishes had multiplied in the Saviour's hand, until there was enough to satisfy five thousand hungry people. Then, with a wistful look, he added, "I wonder, Mother, whether it would be that way with everything you gave him."

In the wonderful gospel story of the widow who gave her all, we hear the conclusion of Jesus at what he and the disciples had observed: "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all that she had to live on." (Mark 12:43-44)

C Flint wrote, "One of the most difficult things to give away is kindness—it is usually returned." Generosity creates the context in which volunteering becomes natural.

Samuel heard God's voice and then responded - and this can be the pattern for our own lives. We are not all called to be prophets, preachers or politicians—but using what we have for his glory is the clue to a wholesome life.

Generosity is much more than giving money or sharing resources; it is using our time and sharing who we are with others. In fact giving money can be a way of avoiding the giving of these much more precious qualities, such as time, concern and skills.

The need for volunteers is continuous

The needs of our community are constantly changing and we also see some of the traditional models altering rapidly. Samuel was soon to discover that his message would be strong and linked to the judgement of God. But there is continuity at the centre of everything:-

- A continuous call for more help.
- A continuous call for new help.
- A continuous call for your help.

As I draw to a close, I want to share an amusing story which conveys a message about using our gifts and not becoming powerless to act or work:

Once upon a time there was a camel. The camel was very young and confused.

"Why," said the young camel to an older camel, "Why do I have such big feet?"

"Oh," said the older camel, "God gave you big flat feet so that you could run easily across the desert sands!"

"And why," said the young camel to the older camel, "Why do I have such long skinny legs?"

"Oh, those," said the older camel. "God gave you those so that you do not sink into the desert sands."

"And," said the young camel, "why do I have these long eyelashes?"

"God gave you those to protect your eyes in the desert storms."

"And what," said the young camel, "is this huge lump on my back?"

"That's very useful. God made that so you don't get thirsty on long desert journeys."

"So tell me then," said the young camel, "if God has given me all these, what am I doing in a zoo?"

Our Christian witness is to be expressed in the many areas of our day to day living. It can be a challenge to people when considering retirement. I read of a man who frequently complained during the latter years of paid employment that he had so many outside interests that he really didn't have the time to go to the office. This attitude paved a very positive way for the sixteen years of his retirement.

On the whole one could say that the world could be divided into 'be-ers' and 'do-ers'. The active do-ers find retirement much more difficult as they have to adjust the timetable of their life and allow a good deal more 'being' into their lives.

Volunteering can bring real balance into the way we use our time. Gordon Rupp of Cambridge published a book of sermons with the attractive title *The Sixty Plus and Other Sermons*. In the sermon that dominates the title, he wrote, "The underlying, fundamental truth about us has not been the importance of our job, our daily work, our spare-time hobbies or service of good and great causes, but that God has done for us and in us the all important thing. We have never been to him an instrument only, a twig in a broom with which to sweep the dirty world, but we are his children."

The call of Samuel is unmistakably clear and remarkably consistent. One writer says, "With patient urgency, God's voice repeats until Samuel at last understands and responds."

The calling to be a volunteer can come in a blinding epiphany, but more often than not it comes in a gentle nudging or being exposed to a need to which we feel we can respond. Today we thank God for the many who do respond through Wesley Mission—in our services in the field, through welfare relief, in our church or through compassionate outreach. Like Samuel, we are best fulfilled when we say, "Speak, Lord, for we are listening!"