

GOOD CONNECTIONS OR CROSSED LINES

Epiphany II
Sunday January 18th 2015
St. Michael, Cornhill
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Let me begin with Morgan Gower who works at Cullen's Hardware Store, somewhere in the mid-west of the USA. His life is boring and one day he stumbles on a couple - performing their puppet show in public. Emily, one of the two puppeteers, goes into labour and Morgan, with no medical knowledge whatsoever delivers the baby on the back seat of his car. As the novel unfurls so it complicates increasingly – amongst other things, Morgan and Emily eventually become an item, as is now the jargon.

This is but a tiny clip from Anne Tyler's novel *Morgan's Passing*. Tyler's novels are all worth reading and they are often about identity and calling. So in another novel, *Saint Maybe*, Ian, the main character, mortified by feelings of guilt over the suicide of his brother gets caught up into a rather strange religious cult. His life takes a series of unexpected turns, and he feels *called* to take responsibility for the future of his dead brother's children. Tyler's novels often have a slight air of gloom portending. But they are always perceptive about the nature of our humanity. Often they touch on how we feel drawn in one direction or another, in directing the course of our own lives, a sense of vocation.

Now, the first reading today and the gospel are both focused entirely on this sense of vocation. The call of Samuel is legendary in the story of the young lad hearing the voice of God, to which Eli, the priest seems entirely deaf. Nathaniel's awakening to Jesus' invitation is equally surprising and uncertain. Indeed Jesus deepens that sense by his response to Nathaniel. 'Do you believe *because* I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? Very truly, you shall see greater things than these. I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.

At the present time, vocation is not the most popular or even attractive of words in our world. It's sometimes seen as rather pious or even a device for not valuing people sufficiently. If they have avocation they won't mind being paid badly! So, in the past there was often talk of a doctor's or a nurse's vocation. They were called to a life of caring for others. Now, with the ever increasing professionalization of medicine – with the advent of 'drop-in' centres and medical centre, doctors are easily seen as high-powered 'agents' or 'functionaries'. Nurses now do a university course like so many other professionals.

Even in the Christian life, calling and vocation has its hazards. Often it's seen only in terms of ordination; and not as focussing itself on the myriad other roles into which Christian people are drawn and called – all lay people too have a vocation. Furthermore, calling and vocation – ever since the Reformation, has all too easily become *privatised*. It's about *my* vocation and answering a call on a *direct line* from God. But what if it's a crossed line, or even that the hearer has mistaken the other end?

Our two biblical readings are instructive in all this, in two rather different ways. First, as we saw, both Samuel and Nathaniel were uncertain about the call. They tested again and again the signals they thought they had received. They needed to be aware that it was not a crossed line. Then second, it is all set within a community. Nathaniel is called just often Philip. As with all four gospels, the disciples of Jesus fit into a growing community. The same would have been true of those working and praying in the Jewish Temple at the time of Samuel. They were not isolated individuals.

For seven years, back in the 1980s, I was what is called a Diocesan Director of Ordinands. It was my task, along with the bishop, to work with those who thought they were called to ordained ministry. Some were so certain of the direct line from God, that they resented any sense of testing of vocation. For the point is, ultimately, it is the Church of God which has a vocation not we individuals. So, the question for us (as with Nathaniel and Samuel) is how are we best employed in God's Church. How do we fit into the vocation God gives to his Church? Seen that way, vocation regains not just respectability but is something to value as a great treasure. Perhaps that's why, in this country, we are beginning to rediscover the importance of apprenticeships, in other areas of work.

Amongst Anglicans, over the past five centuries, one of those troubled most by vocation and what it meant was the poet George Herbert. Herbert was someone with both a brilliant mind and the sharpest sensibility. Called to public life as the Orator at the University of Cambridge, Herbert was destined for a star-studded life as courtier and advisor to Kings. But, after endless internal struggling and engagement with those around him, Herbert offered himself for ordination. Often his poetry touches on vocation; and it is the last stanza of his poem, *The Cross*, which is perhaps most poignant of all in this. It picks up the impossible task he was given to restore the little church of Leighton Bromswold in Cambridgeshire. In his struggle with that, he focused too, his own vocation under God.

‘Ah my dear Father, ease my smart!
These contrarities crush me: these crass actions
Do wind a rope about, and cut my heart:
And yet since these they contradictions
Are properly a cross felt by thy son,
With but four words, my words, *Thy will be done*’
Amen

Readings:

I.Samuel. 3. 1-10
Revelation. 5. 1-10
John. 1. 43-end