

Celebration LINK

May 2009

Calling, faith and the spiritual journey

I had been reflecting recently on the subject of calling when an event occurred that sharpened up my thoughts considerably. It was a routine operation requiring a stent, but I was surprised by some of the comments. 'You could have written the book on angina,' said the consultant cheerfully – meaning, not just the symptoms, but that I perfectly fit the profile of healthy middle aged males who carry on as if they are immortal until the day they end up on a hospital table.

That got my attention. Transitions in life are mental as well as physical, and if we ignore them we may find ourselves suddenly having to cross a threshold for which we are unprepared. I began to analyse my feelings and responses and soon found myself reflecting on the spiritual journey and the call of God that lies at the heart of it.

In community we frequently talked about calling, especially in the early years when the pattern of life was more fluid and less settled than it is today. People would come and say they felt called to community; or if difficulties later arose would cite calling as a reason for staying rather than leaving. Often the shape of this 'calling' was fairly unclear. It was not easily discernible, for instance, whether it was to the Community of Celebration in particular or to some form of community in general; or whether it was a temporary stage in life or a lifelong vocation.

Often the word 'calling' was used loosely to mean primarily 'what I want to do'. It was always understood in our

life that each person had to take full responsibility for what they did, even if there was a strong sense of divine call. There was no sense in which anyone could blame either God or the devil for choices they had freely entered into. It is possible that this may have devalued the concept slightly through overuse. The word became part of the lingua franca of an international community from various religious backgrounds.

Typically calling related to an activity or a role – a usage that was also once common in secular life (to be a doctor, for instance, was once considered a vocation). Sometimes it referred to natural aptitude or inclination. Certain kinds of activities might be considered 'me' or 'not me'. At least the latter suggested a connection between calling and the essential person that we are, even if the focus was still on skills and achievements and things that we do in life.

Calling played an important part in people's lives because the implication was that God had in some sense directed them to do what they had in fact decided to do. This was not a mere rationalisation, though for some there may have been an element of that. I knew from my own experience that there was a kind of imperative to the pursuit of God's call. It was a matter of faith, something you had to do, which might be one of the reasons why some Christians seem anxious to discover God's guidance. If you don't have that inner imperative, it can sometimes be difficult to invest one's life with a real sense of meaning and direction.

It was several years into this way of life before I began to analyse what I had hitherto simply accepted as calling. I realised that, despite a powerful sense of imperative, it was actually quite difficult to distinguish between God's will and my own. Despite a history of spiritual input along the lines of 'not my will but thine be done', when it really came down to it there was some fundamental sense in which the consciousness of self and the consciousness of God were inseparable. It was not a simple matter of receiving commands from on high which, reluctantly or otherwise, I then proceeded to obey.

That insight helped me to place calling to the Community of Celebration into a wider perspective. Many people think of calling as something quite detailed and specific, as if God has a plan for their lives which is micro-managed in heaven. Actually, calling is something deep in the roots of who God has made us to be, and in a sense how we choose to live it out is immaterial. In my own case, I recognised that calling – the kind of calling that kept me with the Community when others left – did not start at the point that I first joined. It had both longer and stronger roots.

It was not based in ideas about community living or even in commitment to a particular set of people. Its origins were in a response to God from the spirit, which ultimately went back to childhood but in later years began to crystallise, sometimes slowly and sometimes unexpectedly as a mini crisis or turning point in the spiritual journey.



Staying connected

The sharing group that came together last year met again at the Green Pastures centre in Poole recently. Most of our time was spent in catching up with each other's lives and sharing concerns. One of the advantages of modern technology is the way it has enabled many former community members to get back in touch. One or two in the group are already connected in this way and were able to share news

of others now living far afield. Some of the former Community children have their own network, a testament to the relationships that were formed in those early years. Building community is difficult without a physical place to do it, yet it is surprising how the Spirit can bridge gaps in both years and miles.

In addition to sharing we also had time for worship and prayer and relaxation.

One of the group had drafted a simple daily prayer liturgy for people linked to the Community of Celebration, which several had found useful in their own daily prayers.

We are planning a further more extended weekend later in the year, when we hope Bill Farra and May McKeown from Aliquippa will be able to be with us.

The inspiration of monasticism

One movement of interest to the Community that has emerged in the last four or five years is that labelled 'new monasticism'. Actually its origins go back to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who drew inspiration from the monastic movement for the seminary that he founded in the 1930s. Later, Brother Roger founded the Taizé Community in France, which looked very similar to traditional orders except that it was both independent and interdenominational. It was also unusual in that it had an enormous appeal to youth.

Other forms of community followed. We ourselves were established in the 1960s and 1970s, and although we never called ourselves a monastic community, we eventually modelled our structure along the lines of a traditional religious order. Then in 1994 the Northumbria Community was established, having grown out of an earlier ministry in the 1980s. Again, this

is non-denominational, unlike ourselves, drawing on the Celtic and Franciscan spiritual heritage. Northumbria has a large dispersed membership today.

Around 2004 the more general 'new monasticism' movement began to appear. It generally consists of single people and families seeking to live out the principles of Christian life, with an emphasis on mission and commitment to the poor in their own localities. Some have intentionally bought property in places of need. Although as individuals they may belong to a church, such groups operate largely outside the framework of traditional churches.

The movement looks as likely as any to influence the church in the next generation, but the inspiration of traditional monasticism may well be equally strong. We had a taste of that recently when Phil and Margaret Bradshaw were involved in leading a parish Lent

course based on the TV documentary series 'The Monastery'.

The series followed the lives of a group of men drawn from various walks of life (not necessarily religious) as they spent several weeks in a monastery. The course used clips from the film as the basis for discussion.

What became apparent was that issues for the men such as silence, humility, being true to oneself, community, listening and seeing the whole of life in a different way were also issues for ordinary people in church. The course helped put us in touch with our community roots and it remained a topic of conversation long afterward.

Like the charismatic movement a generation or two ago, perhaps this is the new stream of consciousness to meet the challenge of these times. We certainly need something like it.

The 'Celebration' book

After more than one rewrite (the last at the request of the publisher) Phil's book about the Community of Celebration has finally made it into the production schedule, destined, we understand, to be published in May 2010. Entitled *Following the Spirit*, it tells the story of how the Community developed from a large family style community into a small kind of religious order, and reflects on how community life tended to shape people's thinking on a variety of topics.

It was not an easy book to write, for several reasons. Many would have expected a story about personalities and full of incident; a story, too, about God working in powerful ways in the face of adversity. Such a book could potentially have been written, but it would not have told the real story. The real story needs reflection, not simply to achieve a degree of objectivity, but in order to attach a sense of meaning to a long running saga.

Because it is living history, everyone has their own opinion on what is important and what is not, and how

events are to be interpreted. A person who left in anger, for instance, might well wish to see a story of unmitigated chicanery. Needless to say, those of us who stayed the course do not see it that way, yet we too need the space of reflection lest we see it only in terms of our own commitment. The real story is larger than that.

In truth it is the story of seven (or even eight or nine) communities, each of which had its own distinctive identity at certain times and places. For the sake of clarity it is told as the story of just one stream, the element that endured and is ongoing today at Aliquippa. The underlying theme is the evolution into a recognised religious community of the Episcopal Church. But there is more to history than a mere narrative of events.

Most former members will talk about the quality of relationship they encountered in community, something that cannot really be described; it has to be experienced. More than that, however, there was a characteristic 'community' way of looking at things that brought

quite a different perspective to religious life from that commonly experienced in many churches. It seemed important to bring this out, and so a sizeable section of the book is devoted to topics such as worship, relationships, church, politics and so on.

For those who came from a charismatic background there was also a sense of theological journey involved in living long term in community. Although the effect may have varied between individuals, in general there was a shift from a transcendent outlook (God 'out there') to one best summed up in the word 'incarnation': God concretely present in the world around us. A third section on God, Jesus and the Spirit tries to bring this out.

At the request of the publisher, the book also contains a little of Phil's own spiritual journey, to illustrate something of the motivation that could lead a person to give their life to community living. Publication will be a challenge – a bigger challenge in many ways than writing. More information on promotion will follow in later newsletters.

Christian Resources Exhibition

The Christian Resources Exhibition is a useful resource, if you know what you are looking for. If not, or if you are just browsing, it is a bit mesmerising.

There is something about a Christian market place that produces a sense of unease. Part of it is the imitation of the secular world, with its professionalism and its sales techniques; part of it, too, the subtle message that 'Christian' equals better, though why a PA system should be better for being sold by Christians is not clear.

Of course, this is not entirely fair; many companies are specialists operating in a niche market. But the overall impression of countless hawkers selling their agendas and messages is strong. You know for a fact that some of them violently disagree with others at the same exhibition.

There is also the sense that this is a self contained world, with little to do with the concerns of its racecourse venue or society at large. But this was not our final conclusion: just food for thought as we browsed the vast number of stalls.



When we use expressions such as 'God spoke to me,' often what we really mean is this crystallising process.

Nevertheless there were some things that were always clouded or confusing. Most people like to feel that what they do is important, and for some the importance is so strong that it defines their sense of identity. Christians, in addition, often receive contradictory messages to do with the notion of reward. On the one hand the parable of the labourers in the vineyard indicates that reward has nothing to do with contribution, but the parable of the talents suggests that performance is important. We all want to receive God's 'well done'.

These factors are rarely thought about consciously, but they are part of what it means to live in a fallen world. We know our worth does not depend on what we do; we know too that there is nothing we can do to earn our salvation or God's approval; and yet we still feel, if only to satisfy ourselves, that our lives ought to have some significance, to mean something. After all, that is why eulogies are spoken at funerals, obituaries written in the newspapers. We all want to be remembered for something.

In spiritual terms this kind of thing is a delusion; it is simply self serving. It comes from a misplaced sense of identity, in which 'who I am' is located in the individuality of my physical body with its various capabilities and characteristics. But that individual dies and is no more, so in the Christian tradition we are encouraged to find our identity in God who is eternal. God is untouched by the kind of things that seem important to us, and so, in our spirits at least, should we be.

It is not that our lives have no meaning: our very humanity tells us that they must do. We need something to live for. But our pursuit of that meaning is easily diverted into chasing things that are basically useless from that point of view. Important they may be, but

from the standpoint of ultimate (and therefore real) meaning, they are illusory.

One of the effects of having a major procedure done unexpectedly is (or was in my case) to highlight this truth. All of a sudden, all the things that once seemed important in life – education, career, ministry, vows, you name it – seemed terribly unimportant. I realised in a way that I had not really taken on board before what Paul meant by saying that he counted all his gains and achievements as loss (Phil. 3.8). He was not blowing his own trumpet but simply expressing a fact of spiritual life that ultimately will be there for all of us who choose to travel a spiritual journey.

Even if this is a truth one has always known intellectually, to be confronted with it all of a sudden can be quite disorienting. For instance it is easy to assume that, whatever else may be unimportant, calling at least will be different. Calling invests our lives with divine significance. That is what keeps us focused and committed through thick and thin, even when everything within us wants to give up.

If we are doing 'God's work', surely that ought to be important? To be more specific, if community living is something inspired by the Holy Spirit, surely a lifetime given to it ought to be significant? And if so, ought not the vision for community to be the driving force of life? Otherwise what was the point of it all? It is easy to get caught up in this way of thinking but the reality is that in *spiritual* terms none of it really matters. It really doesn't matter whether our lives are a success or a failure, or whether we spend it doing God's work as we imagine it or a common task.

Ultimately calling is not about activities or ministries or roles. It is about drawing us into union with God, a phrase that has a time honoured meaning in the contemplative tradition but which nevertheless can stand for the goal of

all our spiritual journeys, contemplative and active alike. Ultimately it is about letting go of our attachments even to the things we hold most dear, the things that have given our lives their sense of purpose and fulfilment. Whether these things have physical substance, such as our family, or a more intangible grip such as belief in our vocation, in the end they are of relative importance only in the spiritual journey.

Letting go is not an easy thing to do, especially if (as often happened in community life) it feels as if everything depends on our commitment. To let go may seem like giving up or at least becoming more relaxed about things that once were seen as crucial. It may even feel like a betrayal of others who have walked the same road with us. But there is a big difference between the letting go of defeat and the letting go of abandonment to the pursuit of God.

The latter does not cause us to cease doing the things we always did, though there might be some circumstances where that happens. It is a moving on in a spiritual sense; that is, what feeds us is no longer the success or reward of our ministerial activity or role but something far more basic and profound: the simple, silent joy of God within. Whatever happens we are at peace with ourselves and with God.

It is easy to miss this state of being however, or to lose it. Even the best of us may find ourselves distracted or sucked back in to the delusions of self importance in all its many and varied disguises. For the more active of us perhaps it sometimes takes an act of God to make it possible. You pray for God's guidance for the future, and what you get is a health scare that puts everything you've ever done into its proper perspective. When you can thank God for the health scare, you know that it is God. You know, too, that you are closer to the true end of calling, the true goal of life's journey.

Phil Bradshaw