

WHAT IS

VOCATION?

BEING A STUDENT IS INEVITABLY A TIME-BOUND EXPERIENCE. IT CAN FEEL LIKE A STAGING POST ON A JOURNEY TO SOMEWHERE ELSE, THAT PLACE WHERE OLDER FAMILY MEMBERS ASK, "WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO AFTER YOUR DEGREE?" OR WITH IT, AS IF YOUR QUALIFICATION IS SOME SORT OF ACADEMIC SINK PLUNGER.

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You might of course have a few ideas about what you'd like to do in your working life; it might be already happening, with previous work experience as well as placements underway, or it might be an open book, something rather formless that you can't quite bring into focus as you look to the future.

Christians talk about 'calling' a lot, both in terms of specific and particular vocations as well as our more essential call in baptism to follow the way of Jesus. Indeed, the Latin verb '*vocare*' meaning 'to call' is the root of the term vocation. In education we talk about vocational programmes as linking to specific types of work. So, whilst our Christian calling is something we have in common we might also have some different callings, to specific places and roles. And this raises some questions – what if I don't feel particularly called to something? How do I know? And even if I do, then what?!

My background is in careers work. Career development practitioners (you might see them called advisers, or counsellors, or coaches but that's just semantics really) help people decide what to do with their lives. We have got interested in calling, which we think about in relation to work. It is usually defined as the thing that provides a sense of purpose in attracting someone to a particular job or field of work. Your calling, such as you can discern it, might be to something other than work, such as to a place or a lifestyle (e.g. single/coupled/family) but for now I am going to talk about work.

Work and career can be difficult terms. It can make us think of drudgery on the one hand, being trapped in jobs that exploit or de-energise us for economic survival. On the other hand, we might think about 'career' as representing ambition, ruthless self-interest and narrow 'ladders' we seek to climb. These are both loaded images, but looking at

the word's origins can help us take some of the extremes out of it. Dictionary corner's own Susie Dent recently tweeted that 'Career', 'Car' and 'Chariot' all descend from the Latin '*carrus*' for 'wheeled vehicle' – it basically means living a life, travelling down a path. We are all doing it.

Work can be seen as a burden from which some are called away to lives of prayer and contemplation. That view of work is part of a two-tier spirituality: some are called, the rest of us not so much. I prefer to think about work as an important part of our life as worthy of attention as any other. It's a creative act through which we all play a part in God's creation. It's a place where we work with others, contribute to collective effort and experience interdependence and community. Our actions at work affect others, whether we are trampling on their hands as we step on the rungs of the ladder or climbing together.

No article on vocation is complete without the well-used quote from American writer and minister Frederick Buechner, the bloke who told us that "Vocation is the place where our deep gladness meets the world's deep need."

So how we do we find that place? Well that's where careers work comes in. Helping people to work out their priorities and their options and then take action to move things forward is what we do. And the tools we use have a lot in common with the ideas we might hear about at Church to help us on our spiritual journey. Here are just a few parallels.

Noticing that 'deep gladness': A career coach might ask you to reflect on situations you have particularly enjoyed, the sort of occasion when you might have experienced what



psychologists call 'flow', when you are in the moment and have no sense of how much time is passing. You are fearfully and wonderfully made (Ps 139: 14), and how God made you plays a major role in what you have to offer. Sometimes we might use diagnostic questionnaires to help you identify those gifts, but really only as an aid to your learning.

Noticing that 'deep need': It's not hard to find things the world needs; there are so many. But framing your discernment in how that intersects with who and where you are recognises the importance of your context. Career coaches can help you work out what the jobs look like that meet those needs, and how you can get from here to there.

So we sit and wait, right? Well, no. Noticing can be cultivated by our prayer life, but praying and waiting is not advised. Career coaches often help people to find small actions they can take to explore what might be opening up before them. Talking to people, getting their feedback on your gifts and talents, trying new things, developing experiences; they all need you to make it happen. Act from where you are by crafting the tasks, the relationships around you and your view of them to align with your values and purpose. In the careers world lots of people say, 'Oh I'll come and talk to a career coach when I have decided what I want to do.' It is easy to think about the right process to be 1) perceive and 2) act; that in prayer we might get an answer we can implement. In fact, it is messier than that, it's ongoing, it is formational. You perceive through acting. And acting takes many forms. It might be that you change directions or might be what is sometimes called 'job crafting', where you make small changes to orient yourself towards your calling. The activities you are doing might be redefined, or you might change the way that you do it or the way that you think about it.

It sounds so simple in one sentence, finding 'the place', but for many people it is fraught with pitfalls and anxieties. The pressure to identify one 'true calling' can create overwhelming expectations that there is a 'right answer' to discern, and then pursue. If you find this overwhelming, then my message is this: those prayer practices that help you notice gladness and need also help you connect to the divine source of love which is God. My belief is in a God who might challenge us to a new vocation, but won't order us, and will always equip us.

We can all draw on the idea of calling in relation to the work we do and the way that we do it. Sure, pursuing a calling, a job which you have chosen because it gives your life meaning and purpose, might seem like a luxury only available to those with privilege and agency in buoyant job markets. It will certainly be easier to make mental space to consider it if the avoidance of grinding poverty isn't uppermost in your mind. Similarly, for students graduating into the uncertain and rapidly changing Covid job market, it might not feel like a priority. But even when your options are limited, that general calling to hope and faith can sustain you.

So, we've mentioned that calling is general, as well as potentially specific to particular roles at particular times. But it can be personal to you without being very detailed. It might be that you have a sense of call that could be worked out in a variety of ways. If the thought of determining one pathway is stressful and overwhelming, it can be helpful to think about a simple phrase that could be used to focus on your calling whatever you are doing. In a lovely little book, *Discovering your Personal Vocation*, Jesuit priest Fr Herbert Alphonso talks about how spiritual formational activities such as the spiritual exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola help people develop their 'personal vocation' which can be lived out in a variety of specific callings. He gives lots of examples, but my own is the phrase 'making connections' between people or concepts. I can do that in lots of jobs. But I certainly do it in mine and it helped take the pressure off thinking, "If I was really listening I would hear a call to go elsewhere."

If all this navel gazing is making you feel uncomfortable, well let me also say that it's not about you. That sounds counter-intuitive, but it is an important point – when we think about calling we often think about what you as an individual should do, but it is also a collective process for the Church. We are called together to usher in the Kingdom; we discern collectively too.

Fitting deep gladness to deep need might imply a one-off matching process. Instead, as well with career decisions, that process is never finished. Things change around us and require responding change from us; a fulfilling job becomes unchallenging or untenable, a new opportunity catches your eye, a new life phase opens up to you.

Phases and stages affect the way you follow the prompts that you discern. You will not arrive and find perfect fulfillment. It might not make you happy!

And this takes us to the dangers to calling. Back to the trampling ladders, over identification with work can lead to both stress and exploitation. Anyone with a calling needs to be careful of prioritising that calling over wellbeing, balance or the needs of others. That's how burnout happens; after all, you only burn out if you have been on fire.

Scripture is full of examples of God calling people, individually and collectively. We can learn a lot from looking at Mary's 'yes' (God invites but doesn't order, remember?) or Isaiah's statement of 'here I am'. One of my favourite examples is the person of Moses and the exodus journey of the Israelites that he led, which is relevant to us individually and corporately as a church.

Think about it this way: Moses had been living his life, with some good and some bad, when he gets a summons, in the form of a burning bush. He notices something unusual. He stops and steps aside. He is not sure. He asks for further signs. He feels inadequate but receives help and affirmation. So he steps into it.

The Israelites are longing for freedom from toil and oppression, but they don't know where to go. God provides a leader and then sends them, but not by the most direct route. They wander, they grumble, things don't seem sure. They get food but only just enough, the future is still uncertain. And they constantly get it wrong. They need faith. Moses works with those around him. Later in life, Moses wore himself out and was advised to delegate.

At the end of his life he knows when to send others who are more suited. He accepts help.

So, vocation and calling are rich seams for us to mine, especially as students thinking about what comes next after time at University. If the job market seems mysterious or hopeless, and if talk of employability doesn't connect with you, then reframing it as calling might help you walk with God towards your future. And if that's not for you, then you can take the advice of African-American theologian Howard Thurman. Rather than getting hung up on what we should be doing, he says: "Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive and then go do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive." Our faith enables us to come alive, to live, work, play and worship, joining in with God's creation. Your calling might be big or small, specific or fuzzy. Whatever it is, they are all equal. Working with calling is an ongoing process – they change all the time. But everyone has one. What will you do with yours?

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