

Reflect on the mysterious ways that God has been working his wonders in you

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Second Sunday after Epiphany – Isaiah 49: 1-7, Psalm 40:1-14, 1 Corinthians 1:1-9, John 1:29 – 42

“Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God...” (I Cor 1:1)

The apostle Paul begins all his letters to the Churches with a statement of his authority for writing. In some he goes to considerable lengths – the letter to Titus begins, “Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God’s elect and the knowledge of the truth that is accord with godliness, in the hope of eternal life that God, who never lies, promised before the ages began – in due time he revealed his word through the proclamation with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Saviour”. Quite an impressive qualification! In today’s reading, however, he simply states that he is “called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.”

If *you* were writing a letter to the Church today, how would you describe your authority for doing so? Indeed, how would I describe my authority to preach to you this morning? Where is “the will of God” in these questions?

Today’s readings all have a theme of calling and authority – perhaps they can help us to answer my question.

When we think of Paul’s call to be an apostle, we naturally go back to that earth-shattering experience on the Road to Damascus, when he was knocked off his horse by the blinding

light of the presence of the risen Jesus. That was followed by the encounter with Ananias, the restoration his sight, and his retreat into the desert for some substantial period. But was that really the *beginning*, a “bolt from the blue” call to follow Jesus and be his messenger? The Book of Acts before this conversion event, has him holding the coats of those who were stoning Stephen, and so observing something of the depths of Christian obedience. Paul describes his “former manner of life” as a Pharisee, learning at the feet of the wise rabbi Gamaliel, and his writings show just how steeped he was in that tradition as he worked out his apostleship in controversy with the conservative Jewish parties. Perhaps his call to be an apostle could be traced back rather further than Damascus!

The Servant of the Lord portrayed in the passage from Isaiah 49 that we heard as the first reading today speaks of God’s call to him “before he was born”, naming him from the very beginning as God’s servant. When the servant pleads that he has “laboured in vain” in this capacity, then the Lord lays on him an even more challenging task – that of being “a light to the nations”, a role reaching “the end of the earth”. The “song of thanksgiving to our God” that the Psalmist sings about in the portion that we recited issues finally in the resolve to do God’s will, and so to “declare God’s righteousness in the great congregation”, “not restraining his lips”.

All this talk of callings in the earlier readings, and even in the hymn we sang, came to a head in the Gospel reading with its three separate calls. John Baptist was the first of these. As Luke tells the story, John was marked out at his conception as the one who would “make ready a people prepared for Lord”. Then, in today’s passage he describes his place in the will of God by saying, “I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.” In giving his witness to Jesus’ baptism, he speaks of the one who “who baptizes with the Holy Spirit”. John’s calling is both

life-long and tied to a particular occasion.

Andrew and his companion were already called into God's plans – they had become disciples, learners and followers, as part of John's ministry of Baptism. But in today's story, they reach a new stage in this calling: John sees Jesus and he says to his two disciples, "Look, here is the Lamb of God" – and clearly, he encourages them to "follow Jesus". They follow somewhat tentatively, and don't quite know what to say – but they respond to Jesus' invitation "come and see". Then one of them, Andrew goes to his brother Simon and calls him to come to Jesus. Jesus in turn calls him "You are to be called Cephas – Peter". As the story of Jesus continues, these and other followers are led to new understandings, and new commitments – new callings.

So, what of your calling, callings? Can you identify occasions when the will of God seemed to issue to you a call that you could obey? Is this when you were "called to be an apostle by the will of God"?

As I reflect on my own life as a disciple, I see both the occasions, and the life-long process at work. I was baptized as an adult, in what my mother described as "taking a stand". In spite of the rather low-key ceremony in a half-dark Church with very few witnesses, it was a significant occasion for me. However, to treat that as *the* occasion of my call to be a disciple would be to discount a whole lot of earlier influences – a congregation that looked after my sister and me as little children while our parents sang in the choir, the life of the Mount Gambier Methodist Church throughout my primary school years, ministers, Sunday School teachers, friends. The experience of the school chapel at Saint Peter's College which led the Chaplain to say to me as I was leaving, "Well, Bill I am handing back to the Methodist Church one who is as good an Anglican as I am!"

Then there was my confirmation when I finally admitted that I

was an Anglican – but that in turn rested on other influences, University College life with its chaplains and committed students, singing in a parish choir, and finally in the Cathedral choir. Then when I went home for vacations, influential clergy at the local Methodist and Anglican Churches made their mark on the direction of my life.

There have been lots of different “calls” since then, but this vocation as a Christian disciple has been worked out in my life on both significant occasions, and in a life-long process. Thank, you for the way that you have been a part of that process for me, as have numbers of other Christian communities over the years.

Remember the hymn, “God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform.” In a period of reflection during this morning’s service, and indeed in the week to come, I invite you to reflect on the mysterious ways that God has been working his wonders in you, calling you into his service through both significant occasions, and in life-long processes.