

My Vocation

On Pentecost Sunday, 1972, when 23 years of age, I was reading the newspaper colour supplement and was transfixed for a moment. For many years I had been searching for some sense of definite vocation. Here at last I came upon my aha experience. Eureka, I had found the answer!

In my early devout evangelical years I was quite sure I should be a good lay person working in some business - the business did not really matter. Perhaps I modelled myself on my grandfather, a popular lay Plymouth Brethren speaker throughout British Conservative circles. Having spent all my life in the shadow of a Baptist seminary, or lived in one, and being deeply religious too, thinking about ordination was inescapable. I was attracted alright, but something kept me back. There was too much about the secular situation that appealed to me. Science was intriguing and I thought about psychiatry, but at that time this was unrealistic.

After my first year at university and while active in student Christian activities and Bible studies, I became progressively more radical - ethically, politically and religiously. It went to the point of deep scepticism, becoming, particularly acute during a Baptist student mission in the east end of London. I surmised that religion had no distinctive truth. I did not set out to be an atheist but, against my will, religion had become intellectually empty. I decisively realised my atheism during the following academic year at the University of Liverpool. However, if God were dead, Jesus was still important to me. I was committed to social work in an English city slum.

My radicalism subsided for a while. I attended a Baptist church to keep some of my friends but it compounded my religious problem to the point I dreaded going to church. I became interested in industrial management. Eventually I decided in favour of training for a career in social work, but first I had a year off from University. I began work in a top security prison but changed to teaching remedial children. I lived in the city centre of Liverpool and then, as I did my social work training and practice, I lived in the north docks' Irish ghetto.

During this time a dramatic event occurred. I had become increasingly uncomfortable with the inadequacy of my empiricism. I had recently been deeply moved by one of the great Russian novels of Dostoevsky. I ventured upon a church reputed to be liberal Anglo-Catholic. At that first service I was electrified by what I can only describe as an experience of the Holy in the Eucharist. Rationally I was embarrassed by it, but inwardly it turned me about so that I wanted to go to church and make sense of it.

As I was reading the newspaper supplement that day in 1972, I read the life story of Trevor Huddleston, a nationally well-known cleric who had been deported for his anti-apartheid stand and now was a bishop in the Cockney section of London, as well as being a member of the Community of the Resurrection (C.R.). I had heard him speak at a political rally and read one of his books. He was an intellectual, a political activist, an effective communicator with the working-class and the non-religious, as well as a profoundly religious person. He epitomised all that I understood to mean by a Christ-like life. After this, I ventured to enquire into the possibilities of joining the C.R. religious order but was advised against it.

I went to the U.S.A, initially intending to go for only a year. I stayed with my parents in Louisville, Kentucky, and attended the Baptist Seminary for a term. I had a sense of vocation to the pastoral ministry but was uncertain about it. I met Angela, who I later married. As it turned out, I completed the M.Div degree there and continued another three years to complete the Ph.D degree. At the centre of my studies was a quest to explore deeply the religious experience that had turned me about. It was in large part fulfilled in my published thesis, *Towards a metaphysics of the Sacred*. Later followed two years of teaching Religious Studies at a small Baptist Liberal Arts college in Georgia and a year as a psychiatric therapist before being commissioned as an American Baptist Church (ABC) missionary to teach the philosophy of religion in Hong Kong.

At the time of my missionary appointment, Russel Brown said that he thought it would help the churches in Hong Kong if I were ordained. Initially I was excited by the idea but then thought twice - was this really me? I was committed to developing a comprehensive philosophy, a theory of community, ethics, theology of non-violent change, encounter therapy, metaphysics and socialism. I was concerned to articulate the Gospel in such a way that people of no faith could embrace the gospel of Christ. I was committed to a practical philosophy that applied theory to the world of the poor, the mentally ill and the socially outcast. It was a religious philosophy of the Sacred that I wanted to contemplatively realise, in myself, in my relationship with others, with God, and in a non-violent lifestyle, and in spiritual discipline. Did these commitments add up to a vocation to Gospel ministry? More seriously, was the question of my weak Baptist identity. Baptism was a vow that I lived out in relationship to God and I valued many Baptist emphases, but being ordained seemed to be putting a mantle of Baptist orthodoxy on me that I was not sure I could live comfortably with.

Following an ecumenical missionary orientation conference, a lot of the pieces of the puzzle came together. The idea came to me that a missionary is one who by definition is called to be out of the boundary - the boundary where cultures and races meet; where God and people meet; where differing religions meet; where the broken, the poor and social outcasts can meet with another outsider and where differing denominations meet in finding ways of extending the boundary of the Kingdom of God to the whole world. A missionary is one who is challenged to go into the innermost boundaries of the soul in order to reach out to the farthestmost boundaries of humanity.

A warm feeling came to me after a long time of chilly uncertainty. My calling was to be at the boundaries of life and of human existence. I would be present as one who could in some way mediate the grace of God in Christ for salvation, be a sign of the coming Kingdom of God, a bridge or facilitator for many kinds of encounter, but in particular for the transforming encounter of the Holy: embodied grace, Jesus, the Word of God incarnate.

Perhaps it was this that I had recognised in Trevor Huddleston. I didn't want to be him but I wanted to internalise all that he represented. Like him, I wanted to dedicate myself to a total love of God, for people and nature. 'For me to live is Christ'. I wanted to truly die to self in Jesus' death and rise to live in his resurrection life. The token of his body and blood at Golgotha was mine at the Lord's Supper. It was here that embodied grace – God's self-giving, forgiving love – was given to transform me and keep me 'in Christ'. A spirituality of Baptism and Eucharist, since my adult conversion, has been at the heart and centre of my being. It defines who I am and where I am going. My religious philosophy underpins it and my practical philosophy is intended to exemplify it. My vocation was intrinsically religious; philosophy was secondary.

For me ordination has come to mean a recognition by the Church that I have a religious and Gospel vocation to perform within her missionary, teaching and ecumenical ministries. To be ordained is to be given a particular responsibility within 'the ark', that is the church, as it negotiates a path to the promised land, the coming Kingdom of God. The church as the body of Christ in the embodiment of grace, a sign of the kingdom and as such is the sacrament. As the Church is centred in reality, in God as revealed in Christ, it possesses the resurrection spirit - the Holy Spirit of creation and re-creation. The Church cannot be perfect because it is situated 'between the times', but it possesses the secret and power of history, the secret of grace, the power of love that gives and forgives to the uttermost. It is the blood of Christ that saves her even as she in turn gives her blood in obedience to the will of God's grace. It is the blood of her martyrs (Baptism as fully realised), that is the power that

overthrows the demonic force that holds humanity back to a grace-less nature, enslaving us to the old order of existence. Here is its true witness. Only as the Church embodies grace is she redemptive. Only here does she show that she indwells Christ and is the hope of the world. Anything less is empty knowledge.

The Church loves because she has first been loved. Her members have been at enmity with God but now have made peace with Him through accepting His grace unconditionally. This means she must love with this kind of love, and so be holy even as God is holy. This community of the Holy Spirit is thus bound to radical love as its truth, its justice and its peace; bound to the humility, openness and gentleness of love and bound to the absolute generosity and forgiving power of love. Here is our faith and hope. Here alone are we freed from the cynicism and despair that leads to violent solutions. Only as grace is experienced as the ultimate reality which is bound up in space and time does it mean anything to speak of Christ as the Messiah spoken of in the scriptures.

With this concept of the Church, to be its minister in some area of its eschatological, saving and transforming task is an enormous privilege, a calling I accept with utmost joy, whilst quite aware of its awesome responsibility. What matters to me now is not fitting my ministry into a traditional mould, but bringing a new vision and insight into how the Church can be renewed by a revitalised interpretation of its historic principles.

Statement to the American Baptist Church Ordination Council

by Stephen Oliver Beasley-Murray, March 2nd 1984