

The Vocation of the Ministry

BY THE REV. S. F. ALLISON, M.A.

I. The Christian Doctrine of Vocation

1. VOCATION TO MINISTRY

IN the handywork of their craft is their prayer"—these inspired words form the conclusion of that magnificent passage in Ecclesiasticus concerning the work of the agricultural labourer, the artist, the craftsman, the smith, the potter. How urgently we need in this twentieth century to recapture this Hebrew vision of the true significance of work and to rediscover the Christian doctrine of vocation. Every sphere of work is in the divine purpose a sphere of ministry. Every man, every woman, is called to a life of ministry, to the service of God and the service of humanity, whether it be in the field or at the furnace, in the shop or the surgery, in the office or the laboratory.

2. VOCATION TO PRIESTHOOD

We can, and must, go further than this if we are true to the teaching of the New Testament. For a Christian, every sphere of work is a sphere of priesthood. Every Christian is called to a life of priesthood.

The true meaning of priesthood, as understood in the Bible, is summed up for us in those felicitously chosen words "on the Godward side" with which the late Dr. Nairne translated the Greek phrase that twice occurs in the Epistle to the Hebrews—*τα προς τον Θεον*. A priest is one who stands "on the Godward side" of his fellowmen, one who in the words of Lightfoot "represents God to man and man to God".

The only priest in the full and perfect sense of priesthood is Jesus Christ—this is the theme of the Epistle to the Hebrews. He is the perfect Priest—the perfect link between God and man, between man and God. He alone has access to the Father in His own right; He alone by the offering of Himself once for all has secured such access for men. He reveals God to men. He is the Word of God. He also as man's representative offers to the Father the perfect sacrifice of obedience. He is our "Priest for ever" who "ever liveth to make intercession" for us.

The Church as His Body is called to continue His priestly ministry. As in the Old Testament Israel was called to stand on the Godward side of other nations—"ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation"—so in the New Testament the Church as the new Israel is called to a royal priesthood—"ye are a royal priesthood"—"He made us to be a kingdom, to be priests unto his God and Father". The whole *λαος*, the whole people of God, is called to stand on the Godward side of the world—to reveal God to men and to bring men to God. This priesthood of the whole Church, in which every member of the Church, every limb of the Body, shares, was emphasised by the early Fathers. "All the disciples of the Lord are priests," wrote

Irenaeus, whilst Origen reminds the Christian layman of his privilege and responsibility in these words: "Dost thou not know that the priesthood is given to thee also, that is, to all the Church of God and the people of believers?" This truth, after being obscured through the Middle Ages, was rediscovered at the Reformation. I might quote, for instance, the magnificent words of Martin Luther: "We are not only kings and the freest of all men, but also priests for ever, a dignity far higher than kingship, because by that priesthood we are worthy to appear before God, to pray for others, and to teach one another mutually the things which are of God".

Every Christian, then, whatever his sphere of life and work, is called to stand on the Godward side of his fellow-men, seeking to make God known to them by the witness of his life and his lips and bringing them into God's Presence in prayer.

I have thought it important to begin my paper by dwelling upon this Christian doctrine of vocation, the vocation of every Christian to ministry and priesthood, because I believe it is only in this context that we can rightly approach our particular subject this morning—the Vocation of the ordained Ministry. As we have seen, vocation to full-time service for Christ and His Church does not necessarily mean vocation to ordination. We must now consider what this vocation means.

II. The Vocation of the Ministry

1. VOCATION TO MINISTRY

First of all, as the phrase "the vocation of the Ministry" implies, it is a vocation to *ministry*—to the service of God and our fellowmen. It is important that we should remember this. There are those who offer themselves for ordination because they think—although the thought may be no more than a subconscious prompting—that life as a priest in the Church will satisfy their desire for authority, although this desire may be only partly conscious. And what of ourselves? It may be that when we were ordained our only desire was to serve, but that with the passing of the years there has grown up also in us perhaps, by a subtle process, a desire for power and for authority over the lives of others. Only last week one of my former students in a letter shared with me his perplexity in this very matter—and speaking of the fundamental difference he had found in the approach of clergy to the Ministry said—"to command or to serve, I think, expresses it". Yes, to command or to serve? There is no doubt as to the answer of our Lord—"The Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister"; "I am in your midst as the serving-man" (δίακονων). The Vocation of the Ministry is a vocation *to* Ministry, and Paul makes clear the specific character of this ministry in his great eulogy of the Christian Ministry in the Second Epistle to the Corinthians—"All things are of God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and gave unto us the ministry of reconciliation . . . we are ambassadors therefore on behalf of Christ, as though God were intreating by us: we beseech you on behalf of Christ, be ye reconciled to God". What

word better sums up the heart of this ministry of reconciliation than the word priesthood, as already interpreted?

2. VOCATION TO PRIESTHOOD

The word "priest," set free from the perverted mediaeval ideas of priesthood and used with its fundamental Biblical significance, sums up the essential work of the Christian minister, who is indeed called to stand on the Godward side of men—to reveal God to men and to bring men into fellowship with Him. So far as the world is concerned, the priesthood of the Christian Minister is a representative priesthood. The ordained Christian Minister exercises his priesthood before the world not as a substitute for, but as a representative of, the whole Body of Christ. God has committed to the whole Church, clergy and laity alike, the ministry of reconciliation. The ordination of the few does not relieve the many of their responsibility for evangelism. It is within the Church that he who is ordained priest has his peculiar ministry. As within the old Israel, prophets and priests were appointed to stand on the Godward side of the people of God, so within the new Israel there are the Christian priests combining the functions of both prophet and priest, and called to stand on the Godward side of the Church, proclaiming the word of God to His people in the Ministry of Word and Sacrament, and leading His people in their approach to God in worship. In the words of a great Free Churchman, P. T. Forsyth, "In the minister's one person, the human spirit speaks to God and the Holy Spirit speaks to men. No wonder he is often rent asunder. . . . It broke the heart of Christ. But it let out in the act the heart of God".

If such is the ministry of priesthood to which God calls a man here and a man there, how important that we should understand the nature and methods of God's calling. So let us turn to the meaning of *vocation*.

3. THE MEANING OF VOCATION

(a) *The Call of the Church*. It is clear that in this post-war recruiting drive for the Ministry increasing emphasis has been laid upon the fact of the Church's need and the Church's call.

It is right that the need of the Church should be presented as forcefully and lucidly as possible in school and University, in the Services and in the parish, and it is encouraging to hear that in response to the presentation of this need the total number of applications for training for the Ministry during 1949 will probably be found to have reached the 1,000 mark. But we must remember that probably not more than 50% or 60% of these will be accepted for training and eventually ordained, and the Church needs 600 men ordained each year merely to keep up the strength of its Ministry and considerably more if the gaps created by the war years are to be filled. Yes, we can rightly stress the Church's need, and the Church's need is the Church's call. It is entirely fitting that we should emphasise the fact that the call to the Ministry is the call of the Church, for he who is called to the Ministry is called to be a representative of the Church. The Church therefore must have a genuine share in the calling of men to its Ministry.

This, I believe, is the theological justification for Selection Centres, to the value of which all of us Theological College Principals can wholeheartedly testify and the continuance of which we deem to be of paramount importance for the welfare of the whole Church. At a Selection Centre a group of men, nominated by the Bishops to act in the name of the Church and appropriately including a representative of the laity of the Church, seek under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to discover whether a man who feels called to give his life to the full-time service of the Church is most likely to render his best service in the ordained Ministry or in some other sphere of life. It is important not to forget that a recommendation by a Selection Board is a recommendation for training, not an acceptance for ordination, which is the Bishop's responsibility. Thus Bishop, clergy and laity all have their share, as representing the Body of Christ, in calling a man to the Church's Ministry.

(b) *The Call of God.* The calling of the Church, however, is not enough in itself to constitute a true vocation to the Ministry. The call to stand on the Godward side of our fellow men, to exercise the ministry of reconciliation as priests in the Church of God, is a call that must ultimately come from the living God Himself. It is true that the divine call may and often does come to a man through the medium of Christ's Body, the Church, through the ministry, it may be, of a School chaplain, a Service padre, a parish priest or a Christian friend; but if the call to the ministry is to be a genuine vocation the man must know in his inmost soul that the voice that is calling him is none other than the voice of the Holy Spirit. The assurance of such a calling may come in a moment of time for some, whilst for others, to quote from one of Lightfoot's Ordination Addresses, "God's voice may be the still small voice, the low but distinct whisper of a gradually growing and ripening conviction. . . . 'Here is a work, God's work, to be done, and God wants *me*, summons *me* to do it'".

All of us are called at some time or another, as parish priest, school or college chaplain, Service padre, Theological College Principal, member of Selection Board or Bishop to guide a man who is seeking to discover whether God is really calling him to the ordained Ministry of the Church. What are the factors that should influence us in giving our counsel and, it may be, in forming a decision at a Selection Centre? What are the essential qualities which the Church may rightly expect to see in those called to its Ministry?

III. The Requirements of the Ministry

1. AN INTIMATE KNOWLEDGE AND LOVE OF GOD

The man who is to exercise the ministry of reconciliation must himself know the joy of personal reconciliation to God through faith in Christ and His atoning work. The man who is to lead others into a personal relationship with God must be one who in his own daily life is enjoying such a relationship and who through daily communion with God and meditation on the Word of God is growing in the knowledge and love of Him. It is reasonable to look for evidence of such love in the regularity with which a man shares in the Church's worship

of God ; in the faithfulness of his witness to Christ in his daily life ; and in his readiness to serve his fellow men without any thought of material reward, not counting the cost but saying with Paul, "The love of Christ constraineth us".

2. AN INTIMATE KNOWLEDGE AND LOVE OF MEN

The man who is to stand on the Godward side of his fellow men needs to be one who really knows his fellow men and understands the environment in which they live and the terms in which they think. Such an understanding is no easy achievement ; it can only be gained by one who is ready to go to infinite lengths in order to bridge the gulf that separates the Church and the industrial or rural society of to-day. For some it may mean a period of time spent in industry or agriculture before ordination ; for others it may mean the readiness to exercise their ministry as priest-workmen among their mates whilst working with their hands in the rolling mills or at the conveyor-belt or in the fields ; for many it will mean living in a council house or a working-man's flat ; for all, it must mean a spirit of imaginative adventure and self-sacrifice. But this is not enough.

No man can gain an intimate knowledge of his fellow men merely by living with them or working alongside them. That which matters most of all is that he should possess the gift of human sympathy, friendship and understanding. Bishop Furse used to tell the story of a man recommended to him as a great lover of souls ; "Yes," said the Bishop, "but does he really like people?" I have met—all of you must have met—devoted Christians who speak, almost glibly, of the love of souls, but who seem to lack that genuine love for persons as persons, which alone can enable them to stand alongside people in sympathetic understanding and to know them as friends. I cannot refrain from quoting here a striking story recounted in a recent number of the *Spectator* of our King's visit to South Africa. After the King had had a long talk with a Basuto Chief, the Chief said, "When a South African comes to talk with me, it's a white man talking to a black. When you talk to me, it's a man talking to a man". It is this gift of human sympathy that is needed in those who are called to stand on the Godward side of their fellow men—and those who possess this gift will be able and ready to identify themselves with others whatever the cost.

3. THE ABILITY TO COMMUNICATE

The man who is to reveal God to men and to lead men to God must be one who is able to communicate and interpret to his fellow men, in language they can understand, what he himself has learnt of God and His ways. This ability to communicate depends not only upon the intimate knowledge of God and of men which we have been considering but also, I venture to suggest, upon three gifts :

(a) *Personality*. The word parson is derived from the Latin word *persona*. The parson is the person of the parish—he must be the kind of person to whom others will listen and whom others will follow. His personality must be such that he is able to lead and inspire, even as the Pastor Pastorum Himself, who "callesh his own sheep

by name and leadeth them out . . . he goeth before them, and the sheep follow him; for they know his voice". "I am the Good Shepherd," says our Lord, and William Temple translates these words "I am the Shepherd, the beautiful one", suggesting that the Greek word *καλος* should be translated "beautiful" in order to emphasise the fact that the word represents the attractiveness of goodness. The one who is called to a pastoral ministry needs an attractive personality.

(b) *Intelligence*. The man who is to communicate truth and to interpret the Christian Gospel to people who, one must increasingly assume, are themselves well educated, must be one who is able to think clearly, to reason logically, and to expound intelligently the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith. He must be able to understand and assist those who are experiencing real intellectual difficulties in matters of faith and conduct, and to help those who are seeking after the truth to see the relevance of the Christian faith in this industrial and atomic age. A man may become an excellent parish priest without academic qualifications, but I very much doubt whether a man ought to be ordained to what must be, more and more, a teaching ministry unless he possesses intellectual capacity.

(c) *Goodness*. Thirdly, and most important of all, the man who is to communicate to others the knowledge of God's love in Christ must be one in whose life others see something of the goodness and love of Christ Himself. As William Temple has reminded us, in the passage to which I have recently referred, goodness is attractive. In the Good Shepherd Himself we see what the Psalmist has called "the beauty of holiness". He was "good" in such manner as to "draw all men to Himself". And He will only be able to draw men to Himself to-day through our ministry in so far as men see in our lives a reflection of His goodness, and can say of you and me—

Not merely in the words you say,
Not only in your deeds confessed,
But in the most unconscious way
Is Christ expressed.

Is it a beatific smile?
A holy light upon your brow?
Oh, no: I felt His presence while
You laughed just now.

For me 'twas not the truth you taught,
To you so clear, to me still dim,
But when you came you brought
A sense of Him.

And from your eyes He beckons me,
And from your heart His love is shed,
Till I lose sight of you—and see
The Christ instead.

Conclusion

Paul, writing in the eleventh chapter of his Epistle to the Romans of the failure of Israel to fulfil the ministry to which God had called her, said, "The gifts and calling of God are without repentance", or, to adopt Dr. Moffatt's rendering, "God never goes back upon His

gifts and His call". To all of us present here this morning, who are conscious of our many failures in the ministry to which God has called us in His new Israel, may there come this word of encouragement. We have been thinking this morning of His call. Let us, in conclusion, remember that when God set His seal upon this call in the laying on of hands at our Ordination He also gave us in this same sacrament the gift of His Holy Spirit to enable us to fulfil our calling, and the assurance that throughout our Ministry we could depend upon His enabling power. And "God never goes back upon His gifts and His call".

The Pastoral Ministry in the Parish

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A PASTORAL Ministry is a ministry in which the Pastor is to his people as a Shepherd is to his sheep. He knows them, he leads them, he cares for them—and sometimes he gives his life for them. This is the work clergy are called to do in the parishes into which they are sent. In the words of the Ordinal: "Have always printed in your remembrance, how great a treasure is committed to your charge. For they (the people) are the sheep of Christ, which he bought with his death, and for whom he shed his blood".

What an amazing opportunity we clergy have! But what a responsibility! There are in England 12,500 parishes, each with a parish church and probably one or two other buildings to be used for parish purposes. Serving these 12,500 parishes are 15,000 clergy. What would the Communist do with such a set-up? At least one full-time agent in a compact area with at least one, and probably two or three buildings entirely at his disposal for the work of propagating his faith. What the Communist would do is not what the Pastor ought of necessity to do. He has, or should have, different methods, but the opportunity is the same.

Roger Lloyd has said, "The Parish Church is the executive unit of the whole Anglican Church. The level of the whole Church can never rise higher than the level of its parish church. The Church might possibly survive a whole generation of impossible bishops and dead Cathedrals . . . but it could not possibly survive a whole generation of bad Vicars and lethargic parish churches".

The Pastoral Ministry is the strength of English Christianity, and more particularly of the Evangelical School within the Church of England. In saying that I do not undervalue the priestly or the prophetic aspects of the Ministry. We share these in common with other religions, but the religion of Jesus the Saviour is essentially a religion of the Good Shepherd.

My task is to try to put before you some ways in which the Pastoral Ministry can be exercised most effectively, and I want to be very practical in what I say. I might so easily fall into a trap by making