

Sermon notes: Vocations Sunday 2025

Today, the fourth Sunday of Easter, is commonly known as Vocations Sunday. It began in the Roman Catholic Church, and originally focussed on ordained ministry, but today it's marked by many strands of Christianity and has widened to include the vocation of every Christian. So what is vocation? And how do we know what ours is?

Vocation simply means call, the call we have from God. One of the first things Jesus did in his public ministry was to call disciples. You remember the story we heard earlier this year¹ of the calling of Simon and James and John? They were out fishing when Jesus called to them, "Follow me." It is the same call that each of us has heard and which has led us to be here today, as followers, disciples of Jesus. But Jesus' call doesn't end there.

Because by the time of the early church, the leaders began to talk about Jesus' followers not just as individuals, but as members of Christ's own body, each and every one of us given gifts for ministry.

Often when we think about gifts for ministry, we think of the public gifts of leadership and preaching and teaching gifts exercised by our vicars and Readers. For all that the New Testament talks about all sorts of gifts, from prophecy and healing to faith and generosity and encouraging and compassion, most of the examples we see are of people with the more public gifts.

But sometimes we get a glimpse of those other gifts, like in today's reading from Acts, which tells us about Tabitha, or Dorcas as she is also known.

At first glance, this looks like a standard healing story: a person gets sick, someone heals them, and people are amazed. That's what happens in the story immediately before this, when Aeneas is healed in Lydda. But there's something different about this healing story.

It all begins with the description of Dorcas. She wasn't just a random person: Dorcas was that person in your church whom everyone knows, and not just in the church, in the wider community as well. She was the one you could rely on when you had an emergency, or you lost your job, or your husband died. She was the one who not only made sure you had enough to eat but made new clothes for you when you needed them. She was the one you thought of when you heard Jesus' words, "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." That was Dorcas, always there when you needed her.

¹ The Fourth Sunday before Lent: Luke 5:1-11

Dorcas is the only woman in the New Testament who is specifically referred to as a disciple, just like the twelve. It wasn't just that she was practical; her good works came from her deep faith. This was what it looked like to have someone using their God-given gifts for the good of the whole body.

When Dorcas got sick, and then died, it was a crisis. Dorcas was the one you turned to in times like this, bit just for practical help, but for wise advice.

So the community sent for Peter, who was staying a few hours' walk away. When he arrived, he found the people whom Dorcas had helped all gathered around her body; with them they had brought the evidence of her ministry. Peter sent them outside, and began to pray, and Dorcas came back to life. We don't know what happened to Dorcas after that. Presumably she lived a good long life and continued to use her gifts in her church and community.

But what we do know is that the news of her revival spread throughout the whole town, and people were not only astonished, as with Aeneas, but many of them came to believe in Jesus.

This story is about the power of Jesus, able even to raise people from the dead. But it also tells us of someone who has heard God's call to be a disciple and God's call to serve, using the gifts that have been given to her.

I wonder what gifts God has given you? Are you someone like Dorcas, who has practical skills which you can use to for others? Or perhaps you are like Barnabas, who travelled with the apostle Paul. His original name was Jospheh, but he was given the nickname Barnabas, which meant "son of encouragement", which would suggest his particular gift was encouraging other people. Do you have a gift of music, like Heman and Asaph, who King David assigned to provide music in the temple? Or are you are like Terius, who was the apostle Paul's scribe? Or like Niconor, Timon or Nicolaus, who were clearly good organisers, and were among the seven appointed by the apostles to distribute food to those in need?

Each and every one of us is called to be a disciple of Christ, each and every one of us is called to be a servant. But what we do as disciples and servants, what we do with our lives depends on the specific call and gifting of God.

Some of are called to use our gifts in our everyday lives, bringing the justice and mercy and grace of God to our work and our families and our schools and our communities, and everywhere else we live day to day

But some of us may be called to use our gifts in more particular forms of ministry. We may find ourselves with a passion to reach out to those in need with the practical love of God. We might have a deep love for prayer and listening to God. Or we may hear a call to proclaim the gospel to those who haven't yet heard, or to build a worshipping

community among those who are new to faith or who have drifted away. We may be passionate about helping children and young people find out about Jesus, or helping adults grow more deeply in their faith. We may feel a deep longing to celebrate the sacraments or to preach.

Those longings and hopes and passions may be a sign that God is calling us to a specific sort of ministry, that God is calling us to live out our faith in a particular way.

And if so, I invite you to explore it. Talk with someone doing something like what you feel called to. Talk with your vicar or another clergy person. Contact the Diocesan Vocations Lead (raewynne.whitleey@carlisle-diocese.org.uk). Take a course run here in the parish or in the diocese. Pray.

Because God calls us all, all of us who are disciples, to love and serve. How will you answer that call?