

## Sermon: 'Our Calling – Heavenly, Holy, Hopeful & Hard'

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Methodist Central Hall, Westminster

Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> June 2010 11.00a,m

### **LESSON: Mark 1:14-20 & 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5**

A husband and wife were leaving Church one Sunday when the woman turned to the man,

"Did you see that dress that the lady in the front row was wearing?  
so inappropriate for worship!

And what did you think of that awful hat Mrs Brown had on?"

"My dear," replied her husband,

"I'm afraid I must have dozed off a bit. I just didn't notice."

"Well" came the retort, "A fat lot of good Church does for you!"

Today two of our friends are to be baptised,  
and then they, along with another three friends,  
will be confirmed into the world-wide Methodist Church and also made  
members of this Church here at Methodist Central Hall Westminster.

In addition there are quite a number of good folk who in the past year have  
transferred their membership to us from abroad or from other Churches,  
or who have had their Church membership re-instated after a lapse of time  
where they have had no links with a worshipping community.

I know that each will have thought long and hard about this step of faith.

The route to this service has been different for each of them,

and we have heard two of them speak of how they came to faith,

but whether it has been through the nurture of this Church family,

through Alpha or through the Disciple course,

or through God speaking to them through the fellowship and the worship,

today they take this most important step in their Christian lives.

They are not here just to look around at what others are wearing,

they are not dozing off during the service,

no,

this is a serious and a special moment for each of them.

Yet this is also a serious and special moment for every person here as we share with  
them.

Where do you stand this morning in relation to your faith in Jesus Christ?

And what part do you play in the body of Christ?

that community of faith which we call the Church?

So this morning I want to take I Corinthians chapter One and verse 26 as my theme,

*"Think of what you were when you were called."*

Here Paul is speaking about people becoming Christians,  
and notice that he does not say,  
"Think of what you were when you decided to follow Jesus."

No, the emphasis is totally different,  
the initial call is the call of God,  
the personal call to each one of us,  
to Temi,  
to Clayinka,  
to Michelle,  
to Kapesai,  
to Kamel,  
and to each of you as you worship here this morning.

You see one of the most important and distinctive things about the Christian view of God is that we meet with a God who is always reaching out in love to us.

In other major religions the idea is that of us searching for God,  
us seeking to reach God's standards in order to be accepted,  
us saying prayers at a particular time,  
us keeping particular religious laws,  
a whole raft of things we need to do in order to become more holy and be accepted by the divine.

But that is not the gospel,  
the good news,  
which is set out in the Bible,  
thus the Christian faith points to a God reaching out in love from the dawn of history,  
reaching out in love through the patriarchs and the prophets,  
reaching out in love most supremely in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ,  
and reaching out in love still through the work of the Holy Spirit,  
the one who is even now speaking to every person here.

You see the initiative isn't ours, but God's;  
God is the one who makes the first move,  
God is the one who reveals Himself to us,  
our role in all this is simply to receive and respond,  
to receive the love which is offered without any strings at all,  
to respond to the generosity of God's loving offer with the only gift we can bring,  
our love.

As St John puts it,  
*"We love, because He first loved us."*

I look at our candidates here this morning,  
each with a very different life story and very different faith story to tell,  
just as you and I would have different stories if I asked you to share.  
But at the heart of each story is that God's love became plain,  
and at the heart of each story there was a response to that love.

You see none of us are where we are by chance,  
none of us have come to faith by our own virtue or godliness;  
the initiative was the initiative of our loving God reaching out to touch our  
hearts and lives,  
and that means we can take no pride in coming to Christ,  
we can never say we have earned the right to come to Christ,  
we can never take any credit if we have already come to Christ,  
all each of us has done is to respond in faith and penitence and love to that  
divine love which has touched us in some way,  
that divine love which called us.

So let me say to those who are to be confirmed and made members today just three  
brief things about the Christian calling,  
and I trust we will all remember them for they each begin with an "H!"

First then, ours is a Heavenly calling.

Hebrews Chapter 3 and verse one speaks about Christians who "*share in the heavenly calling.*"

Now one of the things I feel the Church has neglected in recent years is  
speaking about death and about heaven,  
we have not wanted to be thought,  
as the saying goes,  
"Too heavenly minded and no earthly good,"  
nor have we wanted to appear either gloomy or scaremongering,  
but we need to remember that in fact ours is a heavenly call.

A very good friend and mentor of mine has just been told that he is terminally ill,  
and those of us who know him, and who have been trying our best to support  
him though emails, have been so blessed by his faith,  
by his certainty that death is not the end,  
and his trust that when in these next few months he slips away from us he  
will not slip away from God for he will be held by God in eternity just as he  
is held by God now.

This world isn't all there is,  
we start our Christian walk when we reach out our hand to the outstretched  
and loving hand of God,  
but that firm grip of God will hold us as we walk through to the other side.

As St Paul puts it,  
"*Now I see in a glass darkly – but then face to face,  
now I know in part – then I shall know in full!*"

What a day that will be!

Ours is a heavenly calling.

Second, ours is a Holy calling.

We hear of this calling in 2 Timothy 1 and verse 9,

*"God saved us and called us to a holy life."*

Now I find holiness a bit of a problem in two ways.

First I have to be honest and admit that I find holy people difficult.

Not the really holy ones,

I've met just a handful of them in my lifetime and they are inspirational people to be with.

No,

the ones I mean are the ones who are super spiritual.

The Lord tells them this and the Lord tell them that and the rest of us feel left out of it,

then they speak in the language of Zion which only those in the know understand,

and they usually limit holiness to keeping off sex and a having a decent length quiet time.

These sorts of pious people put me off even trying to be holy.

Then the second way holiness is a bit of a problem to me is that I look in the mirror and I know I am not at all holy,

but when I try to be more holy I nearly always mess it up,

so for me trying to be holy seems doomed to failure.

But here I am told I am *called to a holy life*,

so what on earth am I to do?

And how can these candidates here,

indeed how can each of you,

ever fulfil this call to be holy?

Well we need to understand what being holy means.

The meaning in the original context is that of something set apart for God.

The plates used on the altar were holy,

the priests making the sacrifice were seen as holy,

the temple itself was holy,

why?

Simply because they were set apart for God.

You see God wants me to be set apart for Him,

God wants me to be holy.

And God wants you to be set apart for him,

God wants each of you to be holy as well.

When the great Anglican preacher and evangelist David Watson lay dying he began to realise for the first time that God loved him and wanted him as just the man he was. David Watson had been perhaps the finest evangelist Britain had had for years,  
he was a fanatical worker, who never said no,  
he was a man totally taken up with the work of the Kingdom of God,  
in fact he was a man who others thought of as holy.

But as he lay so very ill David Watson could not preach,  
he could not counsel,  
he could not lead others in prayer,  
and for the very first time in his life he realised that God loved him not for what he was doing but rather for who he was.

You are called to be holy,  
and you will be holy as you make space to be yourself before God.  
You see it is no good working for the Kingdom if you are not in touch with the King,  
so ask God to put a hunger for Him in your heart,  
be open to God's love and power coming to you through the Holy Spirit,  
set yourself apart for Him.  
Try all that and you may not claim to be holy but you will begin to become more holy I promise you,  
and being holy is what you are called to be.

Then third, ours is a hopeful calling.

**Ephesians 4 and verse 4,**

*"you were called to one hope when you were called."*

My prayer is that today will be a very special day for all those who are to be confirmed and received into membership.

A special day for those who have been with us for a while but who today are publicly recognised in their transfer of membership.

A special day for all of us as we share with these good folk and are either reminded of the promises of our own Church membership or challenged to think about whether or not we might follow Jesus Christ and join His church.

I can talk about today with some confidence,  
but there are no certainties as we face the future,  
you only have to look at any of the world cup football teams to see that,  
especially if you follow England or Nigeria!

But far more seriously we also know that from our own life experience,  
in our health,  
in our employment,

in our relationships,  
that we can never be quite sure as to what might happen.  
For all of us an uncertain future lies ahead,  
but for the Christian as we face the future there is hope!  
Not the vain hope of the impossible dream,  
not the speculative hope of the gambler,  
not the unrealistic hope of the idealist,  
but the firm hope which faith in Jesus Christ gives to us,  
that hope which was made real by the resurrection and which is sealed  
by the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and lives.

This hope will not take us out of those difficult circumstances we face but it will take us through them.

This hope will not make that difficult relationship any easier but it will give us the inner strength to keep on loving even the most unlovable.

This hope will not make the way ahead totally clear but it will assure us that in Jesus there will be a friend who will walk with us on our life's journey.

This hope does not ignore death but faces death with a calm confidence.

As Christians we are called to hope,  
that call is not to a fixed destiny but rather to a glorious opportunity opened up to us by God,  
His hope is set into our hearts,  
we can face anything because of the hope God has set within us.

So today we rejoice in a heavenly call,  
a holy call,  
and a hopeful call.

I can add another word beginning with "H" to that list,  
for we follow Jesus who told us to take up our cross and follow His way,  
and that means that the Christian way is also a hard calling.

But it is the living God who calls our candidates for confirmation to walk in the way of Jesus and make this public step of discipleship,  
and it is the living God who calls each person here at worship this morning,  
the living God who calls even you.

Some of you to perhaps re-affirm your faith and walk with Him.

Some to take the step of joining the Church yourself.

Some of you to begin serving in the Church or community in some new way.

Perhaps even one or two of you to start that walk of faith for the very first time this morning.

I do not know how God is calling you,

but my prayer and my plea is that you might offer yourself anew to Him.

God calls you by your name.

Will you come to Him?

Will you respond to His call this morning?

I pray that,  
like those soon to be made members,  
you will!

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