

Growing Together: Abilities

In my forty first year, in a turmoil of spiritual disturbance that was part of my discernment of a priestly vocation, I took my three children and drove half way around Australia and then back again. It was an exciting external and internal journey into the wilderness.

While we were in Broome we went to the beautiful little Anglican Church there and the gospel of the day is the one we just heard this morning. I remember it well because I was in a heightened state of spiritual receptivity and because an old chap from the congregation – also a visitor – spoke up and helped me make sense of this business about a yoke somehow being easy. He was from this part of the world and said that his grandfather had used to drive the bullock teams that dragged the giant logs out of the forest. And that a good team driver would hand make each yoke to fit the particular animal so that it made the load easier to bear, so that no part of the yoke rubbed or hurt the beast. And for the first time I glimpsed how a yoke – an instrument of hard work – could be said to be part of how a burden could be easy. I was left with an image of strong wise hands making a yoke fit so perfectly a unique beast that even a heavy burden was easier, was possible, to bear. And this was one moment, of many, in this journey that helped me see and trust that giving myself over to God's plan for my life, would somehow "fit" who I truly was, that I would not be asked to be or do what I was not at heart, that whatever burden I might be about to be asked to enter into would be tailor made for me – that it would in some way be full of ease, of goodness of fit. And so it has been. And this, I think, is what we are being asked to consider this week. How do our abilities, as well as our spiritual gifts and passions, equip us for the work of our life: our work in the world, in our family, in our neighbourhood, in our church? Where is there a fit between our abilities, our desire and the needs and opportunities afforded us in life?

The beginning place is the abilities we know about already from our family and work life. Not simply what do we know how to do but what are we good at doing? And is there a need or an opportunity that matches what you are good at? Is there a fit between your abilities and the needs of the church and the community? Where this is the case there is indeed a goodness of fit and a sense of ease. But it is not always that easy – what if there are many with similar abilities or none with a particular ability that is needed? I think the reading from St Paul helps us in this regard. We are to remember who the labour is for. It is not in the name of Apollo or Paul but Jesus Christ. It is not in the name of Sue or Jim or Kevin but in the name of Christ. It is not in the name of any one ego or perspective but for the big picture of no less than God's overarching desire for us all. In a way this cautionary reminder counterbalances or creates a counterpoint to the image from the gospel which emphasises the goodness of fit for the individual. For when we are talking about our vocation, or life's purpose within the church, it is always with this sense of tension between the needs, desires and abilities of the individual person of faith and the longer term needs, directions and destination of the collective faithful and faith itself.

Prepared by Rev'd Sue Lodge-Calvert for the Third Sunday of Growing Together 14th August 2011 Denmark-Walpole
Based on Exodus 35:30-36:3; Psalm 18:30-37; 1 Corinthians 3:5-15; and Matthew 11:28-30.

Church belonging is fairly advanced citizenship for this reason – belonging to the church asks a great deal of us: our time, our hopefulness, our money, and our skills and efforts – and all without any pay and little room for recognition and public thanks. Church can be quite bruising for this reason. Now I think we could all probably do better at being sensitive to each other's needs but there is some inevitable bruising of the ego simply because at the end of the day our abilities are being called upon for the work of the kingdom in a way that may never lead to recognition of the individual effort. Many helped build the early church but only a few are remembered by name. Many helped faithfully keep the fledging church alive in this and other places and only a few are remembered by name and not necessarily for the contributions which were the hardest and most faithfully generous to make. And sometimes, on a practical note, we are called upon to develop new abilities specifically to help our church community. If any of you have served on a parish council you will probably have had to learn how to read a financial spread sheet or the till in the Op Shop or how to play a musical instrument in public because there was no one else ready to do so. Sometimes being a faithful servant requires doing what we suspect is not our natural abilities. And if so we may need to hold the role until someone comes along who does have that gift and then graciously move over.

One of the other aspects of giving our abilities to our faith life is that we do not always know what the ultimate project is really all about. We are doing our bit in faith without always knowing what precisely God is up to. When I found the little church in Broome I also found that the locum priest was a lovely man who just happened to have been the Anglican priest in Wyalkatchem Koorda when I was a child. Now coming from an unchurched family, indeed my father was a devout atheist, so the first time I heard Bible stories was not at home or in church but in Scripture classes taken by the local priest. I was able to tell him that his classes – that he may sometimes have thought a painful waste of time – were in many ways the beginning of my faith journey and that here I was thirty years later a good Christian woman with three fairly well behaved church attending children! He was quite delighted to receive that feedback from his years of ministry. But maybe more difficult for him was a few years later when I saw him at Synod and told him I was now in training for the priesthood. He was polite but I suspect his particular theology didn't recognise women in ordained ministry which left him with the dilemma that God had seemingly used his abilities to assist another on their faith journey to a place he would not have knowingly supported. And this is true for all us if we step back a few steps and look at our life from a few light years out. We may well have contributed to a grand design that was not what we thought it was when we gave our energy and effort. Thank God that it is God and not us in charge of the great unfolding and flourishing of the kingdom. Please God give us the humility and faith to work as you lead and to trust what is being called into being that is most surely beyond our limited imaginations.

Even so, come Lord Jesus Christ.