

Experience

As we come to the end of our five weeks of exploring some of the ways in which we are shaped by God for our individual and collective vocation we are invited to think about the ways in which our experience shapes our faith and prepares us for the work of our lifetime.

Psychologist, sociologist, educators and various policy makers have spent much of the twentieth century trying to work out if we are more the product of nature or nurture. When I was a young woman we thought that it was probably more nurture than nature. And so I agreed until my third child was born a boy and was very and gorgeously different from the very beginning. No amount of inheriting his sisters carefully gender neutral clothes and toys made him less energetic, less prone to mastering sporting equipment, or more prone to speaking when his chatty sisters were perfectly prepared to second guess his every need and maternally provide for him! More and more science seems to be indicating that a great deal of our nature is influenced by our genetic makeup – beyond our control – but that our genes are turned on and modified by experience: that we are very much the complex interplay of inheritance and experience. And so it is important to know that so it is with our faith. Not only is what we believe a complex combination of inherited wisdom and new knowledge that arises out of the individual and societal experience but our practice of faith is informed by our experience. Although the central tenants of Christianity remain the same the world over much of the detail and practice of the faith is very different depending on the cultural context in which we live. And just as importantly our individual experience has a strong impact of our understanding and our interests and emphasise.

It makes sense that significant experiences such as falling in love, giving birth, having a life threatening illness or nearly being killed in an accident, or reaching the summit of a mountain, or sleeping out in the wilderness alone, or witnessing a war, or nursing a loved one as they die in pain, or being in the front row at a sublime concert – all these things will deeply inform our character, our beliefs, our direction in life and therefore our faith and our vocation.

As usual I will constrain myself to three things in commenting on the ways in which experience might impact on our faith and vocation. St Paul said that all things work together for good for those who love God. Now this is a huge claim. And remember that Paul wrote his letter to the Romans later in his life, when he had already been shipwrecked, imprisoned many times, beaten, sick, and possibly in the knowledge that he was likely to be martyred as he eventually was. He didn't say all things will lead to happiness or health or success but rather that all things work together for good. Some people understand this to mean that God decides what experiences we need and sends them to us. I and many others find this problematic as it leads us to issues of predestination and the possibility that God causes wonderful but also horrendous things to happen for some mysterious reason. Rather I understand that God is to be found in every experience, or as St Paul says just a few verses later, that there is nothing that can separate us from

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the love of God. God is to be found in great ecstasy and in anguish, God is to be found in peace and in tumult, God is to be found in raucous laughter and in exquisite music. And all of these experiences can be our making and our remaking in the image of God.

Secondly that inexperience and inability do not leave us outside of God's plans and need for us to contribute. Moses, the great law giver, tried to disqualify himself for service on the basis of a speech impediment! It is not just that we are not let off the hook by our inability and inexperience but maybe that our very vulnerability and failure equip us for service. Maybe if Moses had been eloquent in his own right he might have been tempted to speak his own words rather than God's words? Have you ever found that it was your very lack of experience and ability or knowledge that enabled you, maybe that forced you, to depend utterly on God for the right words, the right touch?

And thirdly that the Spirit, for those that love God, will teach us. Now at one level it is obvious that experience teaches us. But not always. There are some experiences that baffle and confuse as much as they enlighten. And some people seem to have the same experience over and over and not learn anything new or life giving. But it is a promise of the spiritual life that if we attend to God's word that the Spirit will teach us. It is an attitude and an approach to living that enables the Spirit to work in us for our growth in wisdom and faith. Without this way of approaching living, life can be just a random array of events and experiences – some pleasant and some awful. But for the faithful person life becomes a journey of growth and unfolding through the experiences that come to us from beyond our control and those experiences we intentionally seek out. I choose to go walking in the morning to spend time with God and myself before the business of the day. I did not choose for my rear tyre to fall apart while travelling 110 ks an hour on Thursday, but it did, and hence I experienced the unsought but generous providence of God in the person of Geoff the builder from Mt Barker who changed my tyre and helped me get to the funeral on time. For those who love God all things work together for good. For the good not only of our faith development but for the work of faith that we are called to. Yours and my experiences of joy and pain, strength and vulnerability all equip us to minister to one another and those we meet. For we are not called to vocation as a separate species but rather deeply out of our ordinary everyday humanity. A humanity which Christ humbled himself to share with us.

So in conclusion I do invite you to work your way through the bible studies and to identify your gifts, heart felt passions, abilities, personality and experience and where and to what they might equip you in your vocation. This is an individual task. And I want us to collectively consider what our ministry might be as the Body of Christ in this place and time. To that end we will have a get together soon to dream and explore what might be calling us deeper into our vocation together.

Even so, come Lord Jesus Christ.