

Dear Friends,

If you are ever asked to take on something new, a new task or project, how do you usually react? Are you the sort of person who would leap in feet first and say, 'Yes, that sounds great, put me down for it!' Or would you be more cautious and say, 'Well, it could be alright, but I need to think about it carefully before committing myself.' It is not a matter of rights and wrongs, but recognising how one is.

There are several stories in Scripture of people who are called by God to take on a new vocation where their immediate response is to say, 'I don't think that would work. I am not the right person for this, I don't have the right qualities for the job. You must have chosen wrongly, Lord.' We can think, for instance, of Moses, who is called by God to speak for his people to Pharaoh, and says in effect, 'I am not very good at speaking. It will not work, I will only make a mess of it.'

Or we can think of some of the prophets. The role of a prophet is not so much to foretell the future as to speak God's work, especially to those in power who are not following it, and will not particularly welcome having that pointed out to them - a thankless task, then, so it is not surprising if those chosen shrink back from it. There is, for example, Jeremiah, who says, 'Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.' And there is Isaiah, who bewails himself as a man of unclean lips living among a people of unclean lips. In his case an angel touches his lips with a live coal, which cleanses his guilt, and sets him free to speak - a mysterious episode, the meaning of which is not clear.

We can think also of Zechariah who doubts the message of the angel to him and is struck dumb for doing so, but is enabled to speak when he goes along with it. We could even think of Mary, who for obvious reasons doubts the task God gives her. In all these cases, if the people chosen can overcome their very natural misgivings and hesitations and trust themselves to God's will and believe that God has chosen rightly (which should, after all, not be so surprising), it works! If they can give themselves to what God is asking of them, then he will provide the gifts and qualities they need to carry out their allotted task.

In this Sunday's Mass readings, we hear of one of the minor prophets, Amos, whose book is filled with fierce denunciations of the iniquities and sinfulness of the people of the northern kingdom of Israel, who have abandoned God's ways and need to be recalled to the true path. Amos is only a humble shepherd and, as it is put, a dresser of sycamore trees. (As well as being useful in many ways, the sycamore was regarded as a symbol of strength and divinity. If you ever go to Jericho you can see an ancient sycamore tree, said to be descended from the one which Zacchaeus climbed into in order to get a sight of Jesus passing through the city). So Amos is carrying on a worthy and necessary trade, but he is chosen by God as his prophet to Israel, even though he is doubly disadvantaged as an outsider in the land.

In the Gospel passage Jesus gives instructions to his disciples on how they are to carry out their mission. His words suggest that they need above all simply to trust in God and his care and guidance of them. If they can do that, then, like the prophets, they will have the wherewithal to give themselves to what he is calling them to do.

When we look at ourselves and our own lives we might have a sense that God is calling us to serve him in a special way, perhaps a new way we had not considered before. And there are all the decisions we have to make about our way of life: what subjects to take at school, whether to go for this job or that, to marry this person or someone else, to live here or there. As followers of God we would like to do his will and choose what he wants for us, but it is not always easy to know what that is. If there is a particular choice to make we can look at it and pray about it and decide as best we can, but what will help most in choosing rightly is growing day by day in our awareness of God and closeness to him, through our prayer, through our life in the Church, through pondering his Word in Scripture.

In another reading this Sunday we hear some wonderful words of St. Paul:

*Before the world was made us God chose us, chose us in Christ, to be holy and spotless and to live through love in his presence.*

This is always our primary vocation - one writer calls it *the personal vocation* - underlying all the other particular vocations we may have, simply to be the person God made me to be: to know him and love him and serve him in whatever way he calls me to - but that may be not to go off and do something completely different, but to remain where I am and seek to follow God in the ordinary things of my daily life.

If this date, 11th July, were not a Sunday, we would be keeping the feast of St. Benedict. Having lived for some years in the parish of Ealing Abbey, I have got to know and like the way of St. Benedict which the monks still follow. It is a way of simplicity and balance, taking account of our human needs; demanding certainly, but not so demanding that it becomes impossible in practice. Benedict was one who felt himself to be called by God to serve him in a special way. In working that out for himself, he attracted others who could recognise the holiness, his closeness to God, and wanted to learn from him. So having desired to be with God in silence and solitude, he found himself setting up and directing communities of like-minded people, and out of his experience he eventually drew up his *Rule*, a guidebook for regulating the life of a religious community.

On reading it can seem disappointingly humdrum, as much of it is taken up with small details of how to arrange the everyday life of the monk: what the sleeping arrangements should be, for example, or allotment of food and drink. It becomes apparent, however, that what Benedict is aiming for is a calm and harmonious setting in which each person can pursue his or her own prayer and dedication to God, with the support of the community. In that way monastic life is one example of how any life of faith is to be pursued. It is in learning to live with each other that we come to discover ourselves and our relationship with God. It is in that setting of everyday life that we spend most of our time, so it is there that we need to be at home with ourselves, with each other and with God.

It may be that God has some grand design, some great mission or vocation which he wants to entrust to each one of us; but until we know what that may be, it is where we are here and now that we can follow the ways of God and draw closer to him, knowing that he has chosen us - as he has everyone - to be his people, to

know and love and serve him where we are.

Wishing you every blessing, Fr. Robin.