

Feast of St Peter, Apostle 2018 St Peter, Ealing

Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

One of the things I do in my role as Director of Ministry for the Diocese is run Preparing for Retirement Courses. I've been running them for years but suddenly, when running one earlier this year, I realised that it applies to me! One of the issues we help Vicars think about on these residential is identity. Being a public person and well known in the community it can be a bit of a shock and a challenge to one's sense of identity when no longer in-role. This is especially as Vicars will also move away when they retire, often to a place where they are not known

Clergy are far from unique in this. It is particularly true for people who have been in positions of responsibility or authority. I gather it can be an interesting experience to be a Vicar in some parishes in Salisbury Diocese with a couple of Major-Generals on the PCC!

A while ago I did some research on training and development and as a part of this interviewed with six recently retired bishops. It was a very humbling experience as they expressed their honesty in grappling with their identity; what it meant to be a retired bishop. I remember one saying that he was learning again what it was to be a Christian pilgrim, and another talk about how he had always felt like he was playing at being a bishop and was now rediscovering his priesthood.

The classic question we ask of people when we meet for the first time is 'What do you do?' For most of us our identity is caught up in what we do, or what we did before we retired, or perhaps what we hope to do. I wonder how we would react if, instead of someone saying, 'What do you do', they said 'Who are you'...

Today we celebrate the feast of your patron, the great apostle Peter. In this case, Who are you (or rather, Who was he) is a rather better question than What did he do? Peter was a simple fisherman in whom Jesus saw a huge potential. Despite getting it wrong and putting his foot in it on many occasions, Jesus called him to be his chief apostle and the rock in which he was to build his church. This wasn't a job, it was a whole new identity.

It didn't mean that Peter stopped getting it wrong or putting his foot in it, but Jesus saw beyond the slightly clumsy, bouncy, Tigger-ish person to the depths of wisdom, insight and solidity within. It actually wasn't so much giving a new identity as calling out what was already there.

One of the saddest funerals I can remember taking was when I was visiting the deceased's widow she said, 'He died with his music still in him'. I only later discovered that this was a quote (whether or not she knew it) from the 19th Century American Poet & Physician, Oliver Wendell Holmes:

"Many people die with their music still in them. Too often it is because they are always getting ready to live. Before they know it time runs out."

Who are you called to be? What new thing might God be calling out of you? We clergy are terribly good at getting people to do stuff in church. But as I often remind new clergy, a

much better question to 'What jobs have we got to fill?' is 'Who has God sent you?'. And the corollary to this is, 'What new thing is God calling out of you'?

As Peter discovered, God's call is far more than doing a job. It was about being the person that Jesus called him to be; it was about how he stood, who he was and how he presented, with far from full knowledge of what he would do or where it would lead.

Christian vocation is not just about which job we do in life, but how we live the life that God has called us to. Whether it's full-time parent and home-maker, banker, actor, Member of Parliament or Local Councillor. Whether it's priest, medic, shopkeeper, civil servant, teacher or research scientist. Whether retired and active or struggling to keep it together. It is about how we hold ourselves in our calling; what is our true identity under God.

The bible is packed with examples of God's call, from the patriarchs, through the prophets, to St Peter and St Paul and beyond. Over and again we see in the scriptures God calling individuals to fulfil their vocation and ministry. But this never begins with 'doing a job'.

God calls humanity first and foremost into being. As human beings we are made in the image and likeness of God and God calls us for himself to be the people, the individuals that he has created us to be; the best possible Mary, John, Martha or Peter that we can be.

And God calls by name. God knows us individually, who we are; what we are capable of; what our strengths and our weaknesses are; our hopes and our fears. God knows me better than I know myself and God calls me.

God calls us into relationship; into relationship with God the Holy Trinity and into relationship with one another; with family, with friends, with neighbours. God calls us into community with others.

God calls us to fruitfulness and to be messengers of his Gospel. God calls to mission and to bear witness; to discipleship and to engagement; to prayer and to activity; to reflection and to action.

And God continues to call us throughout our lives. It's not just once and for all. God continually calls new things out of us and bids us fulfil our potential. And back to my preparing for retirement course. The quote I begin the course with is not biblical, but comes from a book called *The Rainbow Years (The pluses of being 50+)* and it goes like this (and please excuse the language):

*Life's journey is not to arrive at the grave safely in a well preserved body, but rather to skid in sideways, totally worn out shouting, "Holy sh*t, what a ride!"*

©The Revd Preb Dr Neil Evans
Director of Ministry, Director of Ordinands and Warden of Licensed Lay Ministry for the Diocese of London

1 July 2018