

St Mary's Church, Dorchester, Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> February 2026, i.e. Candlemas.

Malachi 3:1-5  
Hebrews 2:14-end  
Luke 2:22-40

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In John's Gospel Jesus says that he is the Good Shepherd. The image fits: we see Jesus doing lots of things that we would expect of a “shepherd of people”. The main example is that Jesus calls to people: he seems to know what they need, and when he calls they respond.

Whenever Jesus touches a person's life we see that process of call and response. That was true during his earthly ministry, and it's still true today. It's such a ubiquitous feature of Christian life that Christians in the West even have a fancy Latin word for it: we call it “vocation”, which just means “calling”. Vocation is anything a person might feel is their purpose at a given time.

These days we mainly hear people using vocation as shorthand for a small number of jobs. “Discerning a vocation” usually means thinking about becoming a priest; or, at a push, perhaps becoming a nurse, or a teacher. It shouldn't really be necessary to say it, but vocation is about more than that small selection of jobs. In a nutshell, vocation is what gets you out of bed in the morning; vocation is what motivates you to do worthwhile things, even when there are lots of reasons not to. So all sorts of things can be vocations: being a friend is a vocation; being a partner; being a parent; being an artist... Anything that adds structure to your life, anything that makes you want to grow and learn and work. We like to put labels on these sorts of things, but for most of us the only label that really fits our vocation is our name; and that ought to be enough.

That's what we see playing out whenever Jesus touches a person's life. The last two months of Sunday readings have reminded us of lots of classic examples. So we've heard again about the vocations of Mary and Joseph; of John the Baptist; of Andrew and Peter and Paul... Again, we put labels on the way their vocations play out – we call them all saints, apostles, evangelists, martyrs – but there are as many ways of being a Christian as there are individual people.

The reason I've spent so much time just now talking about vocation in the abstract is that our Gospel today is also about vocation. But there's a twist: and if we're not paying close attention there's a risk we will miss something interesting – something essential.

Simeon only appears in this one story. He doesn't have any formal role that we know of – he isn't a priest or a rabbi – and his life touches Jesus' life at the edge of the ordinary worshipping life of the community. Essentially he happens to be around, guided by the Spirit of course, just as Mary and Joseph come to offer a conventional sacrifice. We're told that a part of his vocation up to this point has been to wait for the Messiah; and so, at length, God fulfils that promise.

What I notice is that here, at the point where Simeon's life touches Jesus', Simeon's vocation comes to an end. So the effect of meeting Jesus, for Simeon, is the opposite of the other figures we have met so far this year. To meet Jesus at last means losing something: losing a vocation that has motivated him for what is tradition says is a long time. And, for Simeon, thinking about that means thinking about death. When he says that Jesus is destined for the “falling and rising of many in Israel” [Luke 2:34], maybe one of the people he's thinking of is himself.

In the light of Simeon's story, the reading chosen for today from the Prophet Malachi makes more sense. The prophet says that

...the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple...

which is a fitting description of Simeon's experience; and notice what the prophet says next:

...But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? [Malachi 3:1, 2]

Malachi asks because the descendents of Levi seem to have done something wrong: they need to be “refined” and “purified” before they can live out their vocation properly [Mal. 3:3-4]. So the coming of the Lord feels like a trial to be endured. Luke doesn't give us any reason to believe that Simeon needs to be purified in this way. Rather: Simeon's trial is more to do with the shock, the rupture he feels, as his vocation comes to an end. The Lord comes; and the prophesy that has given Simeon's life meaning is completed. So now what?

Simeon isn't unique. His experience points to something that is just as ubiquitous in Christian life as the feeling of being called to do something by God. It is normal to have a vocation, to feel called; it is just as normal to find at some stage that that vocation has come to an end. Between all of us in this room we've probably seen that playing out a hundred times, in our own lives and in the lives of our loved ones.

Our vocation might come to an end in the same way as it does for Simeon. The voice which once said that *this* thing was our purpose begins to tell us – gradually or suddenly – that we have done what we came to do, that we need to start looking for something new. Although it probably doesn't feel like it, that is probably the happiest possibility. When we know in ourselves that a season in our lives has ended we have time and space to make our peace with that – if we choose to use it. Less happily, our choice might be made for us: perhaps we arrive at what we have learned to call “retirement age”, and the mechanisms of the state and of our culture begin telling us to stop. Perhaps our vocation is cut short by redundancy, or ill-health, or relationship breakdown – things over which we may have no control. Those sorts of endings can be traumatic, especially when they rob us of our usual tools for making sense.

If a church is healthy, it will give people lots of chances to work out their vocation together. Ideally it's a place of friendship where people can chew over their choices and experiences. Church also – famously – offers a unique opportunity to practise certain vocations. Just this last week some of our Benefice clergy and lay ministers were asking how we can restart a conversation here about ministry – lay and ordained. Churches should be places of discernment, places where vocation can start.

It's my hope that Church can also help people work out the end of a vocation in a safe space. As I've mentioned, life doesn't always give us time and space to talk about endings, and to plan them well. I hope that I as your vicar can also be a resource for you, whether there's a change coming up that you want to talk through, or whether the change already happened, and you're trying to make sense of it. And I know there are lots of other good people around who would be happy to talk. It's also something you can pray about. Ask God for answers; sometimes he gives an answer, other times he gives you a different question, which is often the beginning of something new.

\*

As I was reading through this Gospel this week, I was struck by the similarities between the way Simeon prays here, and the way Jesus prays in Gethsemane. It isn't a coincidence: both men are expecting to die. We know that there is life beyond death, we believe in the resurrection.

So it's characteristic of Christian vocation to look at these sorts of endings with hope. Even if we cannot see the purpose of our lives beyond the end of our vocations, God calls us to new life. In

faith, and hope, and love, let us then place ourselves into God's hands: the one who calls us into being, and who never stops calling.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.