What does it mean to be called by God? The scriptural accounts of vocation often remind me of a wonderful parishioner from my church here in Oxford whom we lost a few years ago. A war heroine, she had worked as a wireless operator for the Special Operations Executive, and had returned to Oxford to study and then to teach English Literature. She was a gentle but a firm person, who knew her own mind, and never was this better exemplified than at the end of her life. Having received the last rites and all the medical attention she needed, she was peacefully drifting away with her devoted carer and family at her bedside. Her cousin uttered the comforting words “Jesus is calling you, Ann”, to which Ann replied firmly “No he isn’t”, and promptly died.

Well, good for Ann. Of course, Jesus was calling her, but if she felt that that was not the time to say so, that’s between her and God. Jesus is calling you. It’s not an everyday phrase, and yet if we are Christians, it is one to which we all subscribe. Some of the most familiar passages of scripture contain dramatic accounts of vocation. Our gospel reading from St Mark shows us Jesus, at the very beginning of his public
ministry, calling Simon, Andrew, James and John away from their daily work as fishermen, with the alarming news that they will henceforth be catching people. The older translation, “I will make you fishers of men” was preferable only because of the child who misheard it in a Sunday School song, and went home to her parents with the chorus “I will make you vicious old men”.

Leaving not just one’s job and livelihood, but one’s whole life, is unlikely to be a comfortable experience. Likewise, the alarm of the prophet Jeremiah on being told that he was set apart even before he was born, in order to preach the word of the Lord to the nations, is a reaction we are likely to share. Who could be worthy of or ready for such a calling? Jeremiah’s humility shows us also his wisdom: I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy. When scripture presents us with vocation, it is rarely something which looks particularly attractive, still less something for which we could ever claim to be ready.

I remember my first specific awareness of what I came to call vocation very clearly. I was 16 years old, and despite being cradle Anglican and attending church with my parents every week, I was not particularly enthusiastic about the church community to which we belonged. But one Sunday the incumbent mentioned, in a sermon, the difficulty he was having finding someone to run the Sunday school class for 10-
For some reason, sitting there listening to him and thinking about it afterwards, I quickly realised that this was something which I had to do. I had no idea why, I was rather young for such a job, and had no experience of that Sunday school, which I had never attended. But I was, one might say, overpowered by the sense that I had to volunteer to fill this role. And I did, and I was very glad that I did.

It is extremely rare, to encounter such an unanswerable sense of calling. We may think that that sort of sense of vocation is desirable in us all. But if we reflect upon it, we will realise that it is very dangerous. Overwhelming and untested self-conviction could lead in all sorts of different directions. When I was 19 and studying theology at New College, I had a similar absolute conviction. I did not know what I wanted to do with my life, but I was absolutely certain that I did not want to be ordained. My overwhelming conviction was undermined and eventually reversed by an ongoing vocation less dramatic, perhaps, but far more powerful as a result. God meets us where we are. My 16-year-old-self had needed the drama so beloved of the adolescent. It was the right call at the right time, but it was not a sign that I was attuned to the will of God, quite the opposite. It was a sign that I was a rather immature teenager and that I needed not so much a gentle prodding as a hefty kick. Only as God coaxed me into adulthood, did I come to understand that a sense of vocation was going to be first
about God, and only then about me. Jeremiah is equipped to go to the nations because it is God who is at work. The fishermen leave their nets because of the one who is calling them.

We see here the problem we so frequently create for ourselves when trying to discerning God’s vocation for us, when asking what is the will of God for our lives. When we talk about vocation – being called – we are apt to focus entirely upon the call and hence pass over who it is who is doing the calling. And this is our folly, for Christ will not be predicted. We must, like Jeremiah, admit that we are not in charge. Vocation is not a matter of God’s secret communication to me and to no-one else. It is not something internal rather than external, or individual rather than corporate. If we think we know what vocation is – it we limit it to a voice in our head, or the way we feel, if, for example, we think it’s something which happens inside us rather than something which others can tell us about – then we are not discerning the call of Christ, we are deciding a call for ourselves and are in grave danger of conforming discipleship to our desires.

Now the ongoing process of discerning vocation – something every Christian ought to be doing – is a complicated one, and many of us will identify with the experience of recognising, with hindsight, the work of
God in our lives when at the time all was uncertainly, even confusion or bewilderment. But one thing that we do know, as Christians, is that to be a Christian means to be called by Christ. We know who it is who is doing the calling, and we know – or we should know – that following Christ’s call means loving God and neighbour, and leaving self behind.

What we don’t know, is where we are going. And that, perhaps, is the greatest challenge of Christian vocation. Surrendering our control and placing our trust in the love of Christ is undoubtedly easier said than done. But we should always remember that Christian vocation is two words, and not one. It is not enough to decide that I am called, and then to determine where I am going. If I am called by Christ, then it is he who will decide. The one who calls is faithful. We must fix our eyes not on any chosen destination, but simply and solely on the one who is our guide.