



Christ Church Cathedral

OXFORD

19 January 2020: Choral Matins

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany

Jeremiah 1:4–10, Mark 1:14–20

The Revd Canon Graham Ward, Regius Professor of Divinity

‘We Are the Gift’

I’m sitting in a small, overheated room in a retreat centre just outside of Bristol and everything inside me is screaming “Run away! Now.” I’ve been sent to the centre by a bishop for a discernment process by people qualified in the Church of England to recommend men and women for ordination. Though women could only be ordained as deacons at that time, so the majority of the twenty or so who were in the retreat house were men. We were under observation for three days, going through various exercises in groups – all of which I found alarming. Most alarming were the other people also going forward for ordination. I found I had very little, almost nothing, in common with them and I felt about as spiritual as a wet tea-towel after washing-up. There were several set interviews and in this little, overheated room I was attending one of them: with a pastoral counselor. She was very softly spoken and when I entered the room she had a sheaf of papers she was reading covered in my handwriting.

“You’ve had a difficult journey,” she began.

I must have looked puzzled. I’d read for a degree at Cambridge. I was now Head of a Drama department in one of the best schools in north London with several staff beneath me.

“Your childhood and adolescence,” she explained.

“It was messy,” I volunteered.

“A serious suicide attempt at 15,” she continued.

“It got very messy,” I said.

“Do you think you’ve worked through all that, Graham?” she asked, and before I could answer she leaned towards me and added quietly, “I’m hearing you.”

I did not react well to what I recognized as a piece of counselor technique. I'd trained as a counselor. I sat back abruptly. "Do you know how intimating that language is and that body posture? What do you think you're hearing?"

That defining moment in my life came back to me strongly this week. In part because of two related occurrences. The first was reading the lessons for this morning – the calling of God upon the lives of Jeremiah, Andrew and Simon, James and John. But, more dramatically, because on BBC I-Player I watched the two episodes of the documentary exposing Bishop Peter Ball's abuse of a large number of adolescent boys. The documentary pulled no punches. It was brutal in its revelations – about this man and about the church as an institution at the time. I felt sick listening to the stories of the grooming that took place, survivor stories, of young, teenage boys with complex but vulnerable spiritual longing who were exploited and betrayed. It went to bed in turmoil, churning over and sifting through what I had seen and my emotional responses to it, and something began to emerge that was in fact theologically significant. That sounds very strange, but it's true. Despite the all too evident sin and manipulation, violation, need and poverty of understanding, something illuminating still appeared. And that is: the purity of the knowledge of God's calling. These young men were drawn by a desire to explore a calling upon their lives they were unsure about, and Peter Ball grossly used that for his own purposes; but the longing was there and, for some, it remained: bright like a star, insistent, even cold and distant. There is a spiritual longing within us. How it's given focus, how it's developed, how it connects with the different ways in which we will each serve – well that's where human and institutional power can hinder or foster. But it remains. God calls us, whom God created, into a participation with God's uncreated and created grace. And this calling has enormous consequences for our life narratives, because when that call comes into some early focus we begin to love that which overwhelmingly loves us – through everything.

That beautiful verse in the reading from Jeremiah enables us to understand this better. God says to this young man, "Before I formed you in the belly I knew you; and before you issued from out of the womb I sanctified you and I ordained you to be a prophet to the nations." The call of God does not interrupt our lives; it is upon our lives – all of us – from a moment before even there are moments at all. That is, before time - in the heart of the uncreated God. "Before I formed you...I knew you." And though this might seem that what is being spoken about here is some ordination to the priesthood, the Hebrew there for 'ordained' is the very ordinary word 'gave': "before you issued from the

womb...I gave you.” We do not belong to ourselves. As creatures we are created in the great gift of God; we are gifts to the world; we are given. That early focusing of our being called by God is the shaping realisation that we are given. And no one can tell you what you have been given for or to. The Jesuits across the road at Campion Hall go through an arduous discernment process but while the church is part of that process, no spiritual director will tell a person coming forward what their calling is. The director facilitates the safe space in which that realization from God alone can come into focus. That was the key error in Peter Ball’s case: he was instructing these young men what their calling was and how they were in complete submission to him and through him to God. That is a dangerous and perverted act of human hubris. It is God who gives you, and each of us spends the rest of our lives discerning, with anguish often, what we have been given for and to. Even Andrew and Simon are only told they will fish from henceforth for people. The calling is that open and it demands continually that we ask “What should I do?” “How should I live?” “Teach me, Lord, how to live as you would have me live – as a gift, as given.”

When that call upon our lives comes, and it will come because we are created in this way and know our createdness and therefore know, in some deeply intuitive sense, the uncreated fashioner of our being formed in the belly – then the formation in God begins within us. And we are led into all that will make its demands upon us to give, to serve, to minister. That means we are endlessly and always vulnerable – vulnerable to self-deception, vulnerable to weaknesses within us that can lead us totally to misconceive our calling; make it something for ourselves, to gratify our own sense of ourselves. And always, if we continue being faithful, that will bring us to the cross where we have to learn again, learn anew: we do not own ourselves – we are the gift. To whom and for what purposes are we to give that gift of our being? – well that’s our venturing into God’s good providence.

I never intended to be a priest. Growing up, even going to university, that was not on my agenda. The rest is my life having been ordained, but I would have happily run away from that retreat centre to which I had been sent. The rest is what lands on your plate, and stuff will land on all our plates. But through it the formation, which began before any of us were conceived as such, continues and it is in this way that we work out our own salvation (at St. Paul puts it).