7 June 2018: Choral Eucharist
‘Hearing God’s Call’ Vocations Eucharist

2 Timothy 2: 8–15; Mark 12: 28–34

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‘The word of God is not chained’

‘Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth’ – that’s the advice placed in the mouth of an imprisoned Paul to his young missionary assistant Timothy. And tonight as we still our hearts to listen anew to God’s call on each of our lives, that might seem a key message to every one of us but especially to those exploring a call to ordained ministry.

‘Do your best. Present yourself to God. Be a worker with no cause for shame. Rightly explain the word of truth.’ At first glance it seems like an excellent charter for any minister giving their life over to service of God and God’s people.

And there is some excellent advice to ministers here – but it’s not this verse taken out of context. Rather we must go back to near the start of the passage if we’re to really understand the heart of calling, vocation and ministry. For me the best advice anyone considering ministry can take to heart is “The word of God is not chained”.

Paul may have been chained for the gospel, been treated like a criminal, shut away from others but the word of God is not chained. It cannot be – not by Roman authorities or contemporary Realpolitik, not by Timothy’s mistakes or by ours. The word of God is alive and active, it is sharper than a two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow (Heb. 4: 12).

One of the greatest dangers in ministry is assuming we’re indispensable. Thankfully there aren’t too many fools these days who contemplate vocation out of a sense of status, of wanting to dress up or seem important. But it is all too easy to be trapped by an altogether more subtle sin – that of thinking that as we offer ourselves to God as workers for the Gospel and ministers in his name, it’s all about us. That mission and ministry rely on our efforts, our sacrifices, our vision. But no matter how good the priest, the Good News is of Jesus Christ and the mission is God’s, long before it is ours.
For some strange reason, God likes to work with us and through us. It’s a mystery that lies at the heart of intercessory prayer as we bring before God requests that he in his omniscience already knows and in his goodness will already answer; but he wants us to be involved, he wants us to come before him with other people on our hearts and to join our groaning for liberty, freedom and human flourishing with that of his Holy Spirit and indeed the whole creation. God wants to work through us and he will give us every opportunity to be his hands and feet, his eyes and his voice in the world; but he doesn’t need us.

The word of God is not chained. The Spirit blows where it wills.

I’m one of those strange people who’ve never actually known what it’s like not to feel called. What I now understand as vocation was something that coloured even my earliest memories – it was always there and something I just took for granted, like a fish does water. Apparently I first told my parents aged four and was so earnest, they didn’t even laugh. I spent most of my teenage years wishing it would go away and I could be more ‘normal’. There was never a great moment of conversion, of a 180 degree turn in my life as there is for some, just a steady stream of God-incidences, of discernment and testing, that led me deeper and deeper into becoming the forty-something priest I am today.

Nonetheless my heart did need turning. It still does. And one of the key challenges for me has been learning the lesson that the word of God is not chained. God likes to work through me, through you – if we make ourselves available, he’ll often do amazing things. But he doesn’t need to and salvation doesn’t depend on us. That can be a serious blow to one’s pride.

I remember the early days of preaching in my curacy in Cheltenham. Labouring over a message – trying to imagine the faces and voices of those I was speaking to as I wrestled and honed my text at my computer. Mostly people would just say ‘Nice sermon, father’ but I remember vividly the first time someone came and told me, ‘That sermon changed my life’. A young woman poured out her heart and shared how what I’d said had just clicked and something had changed within her. I was feeling very pleased – until I realised that I hadn’t said what she thought or at least not intentionally. I may have been preaching a word, but the Word of God was speaking to her heart. The word of God is not chained – not even by the thoughts of a preacher or the power of Microsoft Office.

So we need to both do our best but also let go and let God.
There is a great line in the old Articles of Religion which was intended to bring solace and assurance to congregations “the unworthiness of the ministers…hinders not the effect of the Sacrament” (Article XXVI). In other words, because the sacraments are God’s and it is Christ who acts in them through his Holy Spirit, our vicars do not need to be paragons of virtue and flawless theology. It can be a comfort to priests, especially when we make mistakes, as we oh-so-often do, but it’s also a challenge. It reminds us that mission is God’s and we’re just joining in.

John Keble, the famous nineteenth century Oxford priest and reformer, found the same sort of thing in his ministry. He was a deeply committed and hard-working priest, far more diligent in his prayers than I could ever hope to be but he too saw that it wasn’t fundamentally about him. He told his fellow priests, “God never lets us know the result of our actions, and in one way that keeps us humble and in another it keeps us hopeful”. For there’s always space for him to redeem the poverty of what we offer.

As we listen together to hear God’s call on our lives, whether as those exploring ordination, as those who worship here day by day, or even as tourists who perhaps just came to hear an amazing choir, let us remember “the word of God is not chained”, he will act and we can enjoy the privilege of being part of it or not, but it will never depend on us.