

CALLING: GIDEON

(Judges 6.11-23, Matthew 10.16-23)

God came a knocking on my door in early part of 1977. I was almost 18 years old and it troubled me greatly. I was born into a family with religious sympathies, although I don't think anyone was a Christian. My grandfather who sadly had died when I was nine had been a Methodist lay preacher and, from what I heard, had been a true man of God but I think the line probably stopped there.

Press ganged into Sunday school (on a Sunday afternoon while my friends played football!) and attending a C of E grammar school, I had an awareness of God and religion and would probably have even called myself a Christian. But back to 1977, this was most unwelcome. God had made me aware of the fact I probably didn't know him at all but he wanted to know me!

I remember laying there in bed one Sunday morning trying to will myself to go to church as I had planned the night before - as if I could! I knew the vicar of a local church the Rev. Tulloch, through his involvement in scouting (which was a major part of my life) and his ministry to the youth and so called boot boy gangs in my locality. Nothing like the gang culture of today, we wore Doc Martens with very wide jeans at least 3 inches above our Docs and just talked hard, hopefully avoiding any real physical confrontation with our rivals, unless of course it was a game of football where anything went and the only rules were those established by the Marquis of Queensberry!

So, I laid there in turmoil; what do I do? If only I could be transported to the church like in Star Trek so no one might see me going to church...

Sunday mornings were for turning up to play football in the local pub leagues, going the pub after of course, then home for Sunday roast (and usually the pub that night as well).

What would my friends think? I had become a religious nut? What would my family think? A lady called Maureen, a few doors down, had 'seen the light' around that time and I remember my parent's conversations about her because she didn't go the pub or the Bingo any more. Would that be me?!

Needless to say, I sat on these feelings for a while, came up with some rational reasons not to take things further and thankfully everything calmed down in the life of Mark Nile. Order was restored (well for a while, but God came knocking again five years later - but that's a story for another time!)

Like young Gideon I could empathise with his "Pardon me, my Lord" when God came a knocking about three thousand years ago.

Gideon appears in the book of Judges. You will note that Judges appears before the books of Kings. Israel had for some time been asking God for a king like the other nations around them. God had up to now resisted this, as he could see the problems this would bring and had appointed "Judges" to bring order to the people of Israel and lead them back to him. We know that God gave in to his people some 200 years later with the anointing of Saul as their first king.

Anyway, back to Gideon, threshing wheat in a winepress. This means he was doing it in secret. No one threshes in a winepress if they want to do the job properly; they do it out in the open, where the wind can blow away the chaff. This is an indicator of the state of Israel at the time.

Once again, abandoning their faith, commandments and covenants, the people of Israel had rejected God's ways and done "what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord gave them into the hand of Midian."

The Midianites were capturing any crops produced by the Israelites, giving them grief constantly. When the people of Israel realized the error of their ways, they cried out for help to the Lord to deliver them as they had been delivered and rescued from Egypt.

Enter Gideon, hiding away from the Midianites; he actually describes himself as the youngest of the weakest clan in the tribe of Manasseh! Not really headhunting material! He wouldn't be boasting on *The Apprentice*, "but Lord Sugar I am the youngest of the weakest clan in the tribe of Manasseh! You surely have to make me your partner!"

Gideon responds in the predictable way we all usually would when God comes knocking; we first look for a reason to get off the hook. Surely not me Lord, my older brother would be much better at it, can't you ask Lewis, or Ian, or Jenny Braddy - they know more about this kind of stuff than I do.

Within this also is an element of disappointment with God that he has let his chosen people get to such a low point, so why will it be any different now with someone as low in the pecking order as me? We may feel that God has failed us in some way in the past when we may have tried to live through awful circumstances in our power and strength alone.

Not for the first or last time God, unlike us, is not concerned with breeding, connections, schools, qualifications, height, weight, sex or good looks. When God picks his people to partner with him, he looks at the heart and knows it's what he himself can bring to the table that matters, not necessarily the individual's total sum of abilities.

Moses was an old man - not me Lord. Jeremiah was not very keen to do the job at all. Paul saw himself as totally unworthy in later years – the list goes on.

The basic quality God looks for when he has a job to do is to find someone who *doesn't* think they are up to the job. What he doesn't want is someone who thinks he/she is the perfect candidate! God calls on those who will rely on him to fulfil the task in hand rather than rely on their own strength alone.

After all Gideon's trying to dodge out of his calling God then reassures him – "I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites, leaving none alive"

Once more after God's reassurance good old Gideon does the next thing we all would probably do – he asks for a sign! Just to be certain. It's like, OK God, you sent an angel and you have given assurance about being with me on this task but if it's for real, can't you just give me another sign that it really, really is *you* speaking!

But God is not exasperated and patiently says OK then, if you want and need a sign... We read how Gideon's offering was consumed by being touched by the angel's staff. At this point, Gideon starts to believe.

While God has a big plan in mind, he starts off with just a little task for Gideon to take on, not only to show him he can become a mighty warrior, but also to show that he is true to his promise and will be with him - or us. Further on in the story, he starts with destroying a pagan shrine before eventually overthrowing the Midianites and all the other oppressors of Israel.

Baptism of Fire - Frank Collins - reading about doubt and a sign!

In our Gospel reading, Jesus tells us clearly that if we choose to follow him and join in his work people will turn against us. In fact someone said if we don't come up against opposition and difficulty how closely are we actually following Jesus? However, as God promised to be alongside Gideon, Jesus promises us the helper, the Holy Spirit, will be with us at times of testing to give us the words to say and courage to bear.

If you feel called by God to work alongside him or even to follow him for the first time don't be afraid to ask him for a sign if you're unsure or afraid; he will encourage you and be with you as he was with Gideon.

You might find that little tasks or jobs will lead to other things you never thought you would be capable of doing or supporting.

At Willow Creek Church in Chicago they have a saying, "God is at work all around us but he invites us to join in and work alongside him" - to fulfil his mission not ours.

Through the failure of the church, we are sometimes guilty of thinking "poor old God, if we didn't have our PCCs/Deanery Synod and prayer ministries or outreach missions etc his church would be in an even worse state than were led to believe its already in!"

As the old hymn we sung earlier this morning says, "God is working his purpose out as year succeeds to year" how wonderful to be part of that work and stand before him at the end of the age to hear him say "well done good and faithful Servant".

If you feel in your heart anything that stirred this morning, whether it be to serve God in a different way or to follow him anew or for the first time even, please come and pray with in the Londonderry chapel at the end of the service or speak to someone you know and feel comfortable with at a time and in a place that suits you- seize the moment.