I Vocation is addressed to all humanity, and the cosmos, and to collectives as well as individuals

*Genesis 3.8-10:*

They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, ‘Where are you?’ He said, ‘I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.’

The first speeches of God to humanity in the Bible are in the form of a command, whether generally about our relation to the cosmos as a whole (Gen 1.28-30), or specifically about the trees of the garden from which Adam may or may not eat (Gen 2.16-17). But this second divine speech, which follows an act of disobedience arising from a series of conversations between man, woman and serpent, is in the form of a question: ‘Where are you?’ What tone of voice do you think of God using when he calls to Adam? Does he sound cross? Or weary? Maybe he is playful, like a hide-and-seek? Or perhaps just genuinely inquisitive, seeking to elicit information? Whatever his intonation, it seems to me significant that vocation so soon moves from command to question – and question necessarily implies dialogue, because the question expects an answer from Adam.

In fact, this verse has caused some little embarrassment for Jewish and Christian commentators, because it seems difficult to reconcile with God’s omniscience: if God knows everything, why should he need to ask Adam where he is? ‘Did not God know where Adam was? He asked in order to open the way to repentance’, says a *midrash* on this passage [*Tanch. Tazri’a I:9*]. For early Christian writers too, the challenge addressed by God to the man in this question was an important part of his finding himself – Adam, and Eve, have to find their own answer so that they can learn again to stand together with confidence before God; it is their fear that has caused them to hide, and in hiding to become lost.

Of course, in the biblical account Adam and Eve answer God’s call to them not only as individuals, but as the both progenitors and also the representatives of the whole of humanity. Their vocation in this sense applies to us all: we are all asked the question by God, ‘Where are you?’, and finding the wisdom and confidence to answer that without fear can take years of discernment.

I have been encouraging us to think in this diocese of the three themes of discipleship, vocation and evangelism, and I think that the order of these is important. First comes discipleship, the response to a summons which is the same for all of us, just as the first divine speech in Genesis is in the form of command. But after that comes a question, to which God wants us to find the answer ourselves: to know where we are is to discover vocation. And it is when Adam learns to speak clearly about of where he is that he can tell the story of what God has done in his life. In fact, of course, in the book of Genesis he does not reach that confidence, because of his fear and shame consequent on disobedience; it is
in Christ, the Second Adam, that men and women find their real identity and vocation, and are able then to speak with clarity and joy of the good news of a God who loves them – which is evangelism.

As Adam and Eve represent each one of us, they show a pattern of vocation for every one of us as individuals – a pattern unrealised in their generation, but pointing beyond to fulfilment in Christ. But the Bible presents them not only as human representatives but also as human progenitors; however we interpret that, it means that the vocation addressed to Adam and Eve is not only to them as individuals, or to us as individuals, but also to the whole human race which is incorporated in them: Adam in particular is a more-than-single figure, in some sense a collective entity. And this sense of vocation addressed to whole collectives continues in the biblical narrative – when Abraham is called to an itinerant life by God, it is so that he and his numberless descendants should receive blessing; when the Lord wrestles with Jacob at the brook Jabbok, he names him Israel to show his vocation to the whole world. And of course this sense of corporate vocation finds its fullest expression in us as the body of Christ: we are called individually, but also corporately as members of one another with Christ as the head.

When we speak as Christians of vocation, we are speaking both of something intensely individual: standing confidently before our Maker in the new robes of the Second Adam to say, ‘Here I am’; and at the same time of something which we can only discern together with one another, as we are called together to be the body of Christ in his world. I think we need to build on that to recognise that different churches, different communities, different groups can have distinct vocations in God’s purposes: there is no one-size-fits-all model which can be imposed on our parishes, chaplaincies, fresh expressions and schools, any more than there is a standard shape of vocation into which every disciple can be squeezed.

So Adam’s story shows us vocation as being addressed to all humanity both as collectives and as individuals. God’s call to Adam in Genesis 3 is itself in turn set within a wider vocation to the whole of the cosmos, and we shall see how the biblical narrative in Genesis 2 assigns a special place to Adam within that. But this passage reminds us of the importance of the question in the divine call to us. Unlike every other creature, we are asked to provide an answer to God’s question, ‘Where are you?’, not because God does not himself know the answer already, but because we need to find it out for ourselves.
II Vocation originates from God, but is discerned and articulated by human beings

*Genesis 2.8-19-20a:*
So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field.

It is striking that in introducing the ‘naming of the animals’ by Adam, the Bible uses the same word in Gen 2.19 as we have seen in God’s question to Adam in Gen 3.9. Just as the Lord God calls to Adam, asking where he is, so Adam calls to the animals, telling them who they are – in Hebrew, the verb is the same, as it is in the Latin translation *vocavit*, which gives us our word ‘vocation’. In his epic poem *Paradise Lost*, John Milton adds, as a kind of *midrash*, that after Adam has called the animals by name, Eve does the same to the flowers.

Of course, this needs to be set in the wider theological framework of the Genesis narratives, in which the universe itself is called into being by the Word of God, who successively pronounces each stage of its formation to be ‘good’ – or, in the case of humanity, ‘very good’. The cosmos as a whole shares in a divine vocation, although the realisation of that is currently frustrated by the consequences of human sin – as Paul writes in Rom 8.21, ‘the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God’. In some mysterious sense, yet to be revealed, the vocation of the whole universe is inextricably linked to the vocation of its highest ornament, humanity.

But the human role in the vocation of creation is not limited to its fulfilment; it also appears in its discernment and articulation, as this passage makes clear. In a striking phrase, the Bible tells us that God brought the animals to Adam to see what he would call them – here is a powerful expression of the respect which the Lord has for his most precious creature, holding back from naming the animals themselves to give space for Adam’s insight into their nature. This is a strong image of the partnership of human and divine in discerning the precise content of vocation for each living being.

What is the basis for Adam’s selection of one name rather than another? There are two rather different interpretations available here. The first is represented by, for example, Martin Luther. Commenting on this passage from Genesis, Luther writes that: ‘Adam arrives at such a knowledge of their [each individual animal’s] nature that he can give each one a suitable name that harmonises with its nature’. The first human being in the biblical narrative is endowed with an innate wisdom that enables him to see deep into the identity of his fellow creatures. We might see in this a foretaste of the penetrating wisdom of the Second Adam, of whom John says that ‘he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone’ (Jn 2.24b-25). In a world now populated by humans as well as other animals, Jesus shows among us the divine wisdom
which sees right into the heart of each one’s identity – and it is this wisdom which is needed to discern an individual’s vocation.

The interpretation I am following of Adam’s naming of the animals is not the only one which has been proposed. Many commentators have seen in this episode a demonstration, not of knowledge, but of power, a first fulfilment of the divine command to ‘have dominion … over every living thing’ (Gen 1.28). By knowing another’s name, it is said, one gains supremacy over them; still more would that be so for Adam, who not only knows the names but devises them in the first place. On such a view, the human relationship to the other is primarily one of domineering usage rather than respectful enjoyment — and such a view would leave little space or interest for discerning what might be the other’s own particular vocation. Other creatures would be there simply to be used in subjection: an instrumental view of creation.

If, though, we see this passage as speaking of knowledge rather than power, as Luther does, then we could say that what Adam is doing in calling the creatures by name is identifying and articulating what the medieval theologian Duns Scotus called by a splendidly clumsy word, ‘haecceity’ (haecceitas), ‘thingness’, the distinctive mesh of characteristics, experiences, possibilities and expressions that make each creature what it is and not something else. If that sounds obscure, it is perhaps best expressed in poetic language, as in Gerard Manley Hopkins extraordinarily dense As Kingfishers catch fire:

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell’s
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves — goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,
Crying Whát I dó is me: for that I came.

As for other animals, so for us humans, our vocation is in God’s purposes to discover and express this haecceity — in other words, for each of us to find our true, ideal self, which is the identity for which God has created us. This can take a long time, and one of the differences between us and other animals is that we may well make mistakes on the way, thinking that we are called to be something or somebody that we are not. This indeed is the reason why we are the only creatures to be questioned about our vocation. But the biblical account of Adam’s naming of the animals reminds us of the other difference between us and other animals: that through the wisdom of discernment we humans share from the beginning with God in the task of uncovering and articulating what vocation means for each.

This kind of human wisdom in discernment offered to our fellow human beings is then a real partnership working with God. It is the principle which underlies, for example, the work of Vocations Advisers in this diocese; of diocesan panels to discern lay ministries; of BAPs for ordained ministry; even of the Crown Nomination Commissions which meet to discern
diocesan bishops. Human wisdom has a real part to play in discerning vocation, and it has
done right back from the time when God brought the animals to Adam to see what he
would call them.

III  Vocation is within the secular world as well as in the Church

1 Cor 7.20-24:
Let each of you remain in the condition in which you were called. Were you a slave when called? Do
not be concerned about it. Even if you can gain your freedom, make use of your present condition
now more than ever. For whoever was called in the Lord as a slave is a freed person belonging to the
Lord, just as whoever was free when called is a slave of Christ. You were bought with a price; do not
become slaves of human masters. In whatever condition you were called, brothers and sisters, there
remain with God.

I mentioned in the last Bible Study the interpretation which Luther gave of Adam’s naming
of the animals, which seemed to me the right approach to take. In this passage, I think that
Luther’s exegesis may actually be faulty – but he still develops from that a wonderful
doctrine of vocation which has much to teach us. This is a particularly complex passage,
since so much depends on the translations which we follow.

If you have had any official dealings in Germany – and you would not have to be there long
before you become involved with officialdom in some way – you will probably be asked to
fill out a form with the boxes: Name, Vorname, Beruf – surname, first name, and Beruf. We
could naturally translate this as ‘occupation’, or maybe employment, and that is what it
means in modern German; but its literal meaning is ‘calling’ or ‘vocation’, and its present
German meaning in a sense goes back to Luther’s interpretation of this passage, which
actually is not that different from the word ‘condition’ which the NRSV uses here.

The problem is, that the Greek which Paul wrote used in 7.20 the word klēsis, which means
‘a being called’. When the NRSV repeats ‘condition’ in 7.24, it is actually supplying a word
that is not there in the original, which just says ‘in whatever you were called ...’. Luther in his
German Bible of 1522 translated klēsis as beruf, and he understood by that occupation,
having in mind the way in which people in the late-medieval society of his time were
assigned to different tasks according to their ‘station in life’. However, usually in Paul, klēsis
refers to the calling by which God brings us through faith in Jesus from darkness to light,
from death to life; in other words, it is not about occupation, but about salvation.

And there is another complication in this text, which is the meaning of the little Greek
pronoun hē. The NRSV, again following Luther, treats this as ‘in which’ – remain in the beruf,
the occupation, in which you were called. But it can also mean ‘by which’ – which would
then give us something more like ‘stay faithful to the summons to salvation by which you
were called’. This is a dynamic account of the transformation which Christian faith brings,
while by contrast Luther interpreted beruf as something essentially static – in fact, he used the synonym Stand, ‘station’, which is as immobile as could be. As a result, Lutheran theology has been criticised for teaching a submissive or quiescent attitude to social hierarchy: by separating klēsis from its salvation language, so effectively secularising it, Luther denied to slaves, or to others in lowly social positions, a motivation towards liberation and change.

I think there is some justice in these criticisms, and it probably is the case that Luther’s reading of this passage is mistaken. However, it also had enormously positive consequences for his account of the meaning of Christian vocation in the world, beruf. Briefly, Luther taught that – contrary to the medieval view of vocation which believed both that the monastic life was the best of all callings, and that priests were called to a higher way of life than lay people – every Christian was meant to live out their vocation in the ordinary circumstances of their working and family lives. In a Christmas sermon, for example, he said of the shepherds of Bethlehem – very low down in the social and religious hierarchy as they were – that: ‘All works are the same to a Christian, no matter what they are. These shepherds … return to their place in the fields to serve God there’.

In fact, Luther believed and taught that it was through the commitment of ordinary people that God typically worked in the world. He expressed this through the theme of everyday vocations, beruf, as the ‘masks of God’ (larvae Dei) – that is, realities which conceal yet also express the working of the divine in the secular world. Commenting on Psalm 147.13-14, ‘He strengthens the bars of your gates; he blesses your children within you. He grants peace within your borders; he fills you with the finest of wheat’, Luther asked how this beneficent divine activity related to the ordinary human labour which appeared to be necessary for the strengthening of gates, the sowing and harvesting of wheat, and so on. His reply was:

> God could easily give you grain and fruit without your ploughing and planting. But He does not want to do so ... What else is all our work to God – whether in the fields, in the garden, in the city, in the house, in war, or in government – but just such a child’s performance, by which He wants to give his gifts in the fields, at home, and everywhere else? These are the masks of God behind which he wants to remain concealed and do all things.

A fully rounded account of vocation must take on board what Luther is saying here. All calling, klēsis, comes from God, but it finds expression in the world as well as in the life of the Church. We have often narrowed down the language of vocation to refer solely to ecclesiastical ministry, and usually within that specifically to ordained ministry; but God’s calling is to each and every Christian, and finds very different expressions in very different contexts, both secular and religious. We cannot achieve vocational renewal as the People of God unless we recover this sense of everyday lives as being larvae Dei, masks of God through which his work is done. John Keble would have hated to be bracketed with Luther, but he was saying essentially the same thing when he wrote:
We need not bid, for cloistered cell, Our neighbour and our work farewell,
Nor strive to wind ourselves too high For sinful man beneath the sky:
The trivial round, the common task, Would furnish all we need to ask

We are in this diocese about to embark on discussion of a substantial new report from the national Church, Setting God’s People Free, which addresses just these points, insisting that for most Christians vocation is in the first place to be exercised in the world, not in the church; the people of God need to be set free so that, instead of spending all their energy in churchy activities, they can be divine agents in the world.

IV  Vocations to ministry in the Church are diverse but need each other

1 Cor3.1-9:
And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? For when one says, ‘I belong to Paul’, and another, ‘I belong to Apollos’, are you not merely human? What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labour of each. For we are God’s servants, working together; you are God’s field, God’s building.

The figure of Apollos has been much debated in New Testament scholarship. Is the description of him in Acts 18 as ‘an eloquent man, well-versed in the scriptures’ meant to indicate his resemblance to Paul or to highlight the difference between them? Was he an apostle or not an apostle? Is he best seen as a colleague of Paul or as a rival? Did he write the Letter to the Hebrews, as Luther among others suggested?

And then how do the various factions in the Corinthian church line up? They are mentioned here, but fully listed in 1 Cor 1.12, where ‘each of you says “I belong to Paul” or “I belong to Apollos”, or “I belong to Cephas”, or “I belong to Christ”. Almost every permutation of these has been tried out as an interpretation of these – the party of Paul-and-Apollos vs that of Cephas; of Paul-and-Cephas vs of Apollos; of Paul vs of Apollos vs of Cephas; of all three vs that of Christ, and so on. So much is unclear – but what is clear is this.

Paul wants urgently to move the discussion on from that of personal rivalry between himself and Apollos – whether that be a rivalry actually founded in the personality of the principals or simply imputed to them by their enthusiastic followers – and in vv 5-9 he does that in three steps. Instead, first, he wants to focus on the differing ministerial role which each
fulfils; second, he wants to relativise both their ministries in comparison to the primacy of God; third, points back to the life of the church as the context and result of ministry.

First, then, Paul points away from himself and Apollos as individuals – or, we might say, as leaders – to remind the Corinthians that they are ‘servants, through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each’. The language here is significant, both of the human recipients and of the divine dispensation. The word translated ‘servant’ is in fact diakonos, our ‘deacon’. Sometimes Paul uses of himself the stronger word doulos, ‘slave’, but here he wants to emphasise the significance of the role which he and Apollos receive, and diakonos carries with it that simultaneous sense of servanthood and of authorisation which is the bedrock of all Christian ministry.

When he speaks of the Lord ‘assigning’ a role to each diakonos a distinctive role, Paul uses the simple verb didōmi, ‘to give’. In fact, this is common in the Pauline literature: in his two great lists of ministries, the language is always simply that of ‘gift’, differentiated according to the working of the Spirit in 1 Cor 12, of Christ himself in Eph 4. In this passage too, the roles of planting and ‘watering’ are different indeed, but the vocation of which Paul speaks here is in both cases to a ministry which is fundamentally diaconal in character, and it is experienced as sheer gift. All of us who are called to ministry in the Church need to remember this; we so easily speak of ‘our’ ministry as if it were a personal possession, and we so often think in the first case in terms of leadership rather than service.

Secondly, Paul goes on to minimise his and Apollos’ role of ‘planting’ and ‘watering; respectively by comparison with the divine work of ‘giving the growth’. Neither the planter nor the waterer is ti, ‘a thing’, besides God, but just one who receives ‘a reward’ – the word is quite general, stressing the receptivity of ministry rather than any sense of entitlement. Paul here is repeating the teaching on growth of Jesus in the synoptic gospels, where the emphasis is on the seed growing ‘secretly’ or ‘of its own accord’ – both phrases pointing to the mysterious and unforced divine activity which alone can bring increase to the Kingdom. We cannot manufacture growth, it is the result of hidden divine activity.

Where does that leave us as those who experience vocation to ministry? Verse 9 in the NRSV translation says, presumably of Paul and Apollos: ‘We are God’s servants, working together’. In fact, there is a double reference here, to a partnership which is simultaneously between humans and between humans and the divine. Paul uses the word synergos, from which our ‘synergy’ derives. Undoubtedly he wants to stress the synergy between himself and Apollos, the need to work together as fellow servants to build up the church rather than allow for division to grow. But synergos theou literally means ‘fellow workers with God’: partnership is not just between ministers, but between those ministers and God himself. Our vocation is, to share in the life-giving work of God. How extraordinary is that.
Finally, Paul turns from the language of ‘we’, i.e. himself and Apollos, back to that of ‘you’, i.e. the Corinthian church. But the point at which he does so is in fact unclear: verse 9 says, ‘We are God’s fellow-workers; God’s field; God’s building are you’. ‘In other words, ‘field’ could go either with ‘we’ or with ‘you’. It is probably more natural to take the second reading, as the NRSV does, so that it is the church which is being referred to by first an agricultural and then an architectural metaphor. Still, it is significant that the ‘we’ and the ‘you’ are so closely elided here – Paul and Apollos may indeed be singled out by vocations to particular ministries in the church, but at the same time they are part of the community of faithful disciples, which is the primary call of all Christians. It is so important for all of us in ministry to remember this, because it is so easy for us to forget: before we set about planting or watering, or building, we have to remember that we are first and foremost part of the field, the building. Before we act as shepherd, we are part of the flock. Before we are given any role of leadership, we are first and always followers of Jesus. Please try and remember this fundamental truth every day for yourselves, and please remind me when I forget it myself. As St Augustine said, *vobis episcopus obiscum Christianus*: ‘For you I am a bishop, with you I am a Christian’.

If we remember anything we need to remember this: discipleship always comes before ministry. Vocations differ for each, but discipleship is the same for all.