**Vocation Sunday 9 September 2018**

**The Very Rev’d Frank Nelson**

*Proverbs 22: 1 – 2, 8 – 9, 22 - 23*

*Psalm 125*

*James 2: 1 – 10, 14 - 17*

*Mark 7: 24 - 37*

I feel something of a fraud standing here this morning to preach – particularly on this Sunday with the rather clumsy, but nonetheless descriptive, title of “Vocations/Calling Sunday.” Why a fraud? Surely I have a vocation and therefore as much right as anyone to preach on this particular Sunday? The fraud part comes because there are two very fine sermons written by two of our own Cathedral people – which are unlikely to be preached anywhere this morning. I refer you to the latest edition of the Diocesan magazine, Guardian, in which Stuart Langshaw introduces the theme for today, to be followed by interviews given by Angela Evans and Tony Iluno, and two other people. If you have not yet read these sermons I do commend them to you. Better still, seek out Tony and Angela and ask them about their understanding of vocation. And I am interested that in a cathedral in which we are blessed with a number of ordained people – both those formally on the staff and others who choose to make this place their spiritual home - the two cathedral people chosen to be interviewed about their understanding of vocation, being called by God, are both lay people.

And that is absolutely as it should be. For vocation is not a word reserved for those of us who wear our collars back to front or have a bishop’s hands laid on us at ordination; but a word and concept that applies to every single person who has been baptized. Baptism is the proper response to being called by Jesus to follow Him. There is no one right or only way of doing this. More important is the recognition that God’s people, the baptized, are called by God to make a difference in the world, and especially in their world. This is why I am so pleased to read the sermons by Angela and Tony – they see their ordinary everyday work as vocation, as a calling by God.

Of course, baptism alone is not enough. It is not simply a case of being baptized, confirmed even, and then thinking – that’s it, nothing more for me to do. This was the driving factor behind the thinking of James in the letter that bears his name. Faith in God is not simply about saying or even believing the right things. It is more even than keeping God’s Law, expressed in summary form in the Ten Commandments. The example of the rich young man who asked Jesus what more he had to do reminds us that keeping the letter of the law is not, of itself, what is required. There is more – and James sums it up in verse 8 of Chapter 2 when he writes: “You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’” Love your neighbour as yourself. But who is my neighbour? I am sure you remember the answer Jesus gave to that question – contained in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Today’s Gospel suggests that even Jesus had to learn a new understanding of what “Love your neighbour meant.” Having travelled far out of his normal home area, Jesus tried to get away from the crowds and have a few moments of peace and quiet. Surely no one would know him in Tyre. Barely had Jesus entered the house to rest than a woman, unnamed, burst through the doors. We are not told her name, but we are given some important information about her. She is a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She’s an outsider. One who doesn’t belong! In underlining her ethnicity and the fact that she definitely was not a Jew, not one of those who believed they were God’s Chosen People, Mark is restating the point he has already made in setting this scene in Tyre, in non-Jewish territory. The woman has absolutely no right to impose on Jesus. She knows it and he knows it – and, furthermore, makes it clear in his initial response: “Let the children be fed first…”

Why is this story in Mark’s Gospel - followed closely by the next, also set in Gentile territory? Yes it demonstrates what we know very well, that the Christian Gospel is for everyone, not restricted to those of only one ethnicity, or social class, or sexual orientation, or language grouping, or skin colour. But for Mark’s first readers, those for whom the Gospel was initially written, there was a very big issue facing them. The issue was what to do with all the Gentiles, the non-Jews, who were captivated by the message of God’s love in Jesus, who wanted to follow Jesus and share the common cup and break bread together. With the vast majority of us, perhaps even everyone who hears or reads this sermon, not having any Jewish heritage, and therefore being classed as Gentile, it is not an issue. We know that Christ died for all – we have Paul’s letters, especially Romans, and we have the accounts in the Book of Acts – Peter and Cornelius, the first Synod, where the early Christians grappled with the issue of Gentiles. But Mark’s readers were in the thick of it. And they would have looked to the example of Jesus.

What they found there was quite shocking. Jesus himself confronted by this Gentile woman demanding that he heal her daughter. She would not be fobbed off with clever words about the children being fed before the dogs. Despite the scarcely veiled insult she persists and gives as good as she gets. “Even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” This unnamed Syrophoenician woman opened the door to others and forced those early Jewish Christians to open their doors too.

Interestingly, the Jews should not have been surprised at this. Their own scriptures, some of which we have heard in today’s Psalm and the few verses from Proverbs, suggests that God has always been prepared to stand for those who have little, and have no one to champion their cause – the so-called ‘poor’. And more, that to be truly blessed, truly a person of God, was to side with God on the side of the poor. This was their calling as Jews. It was the message the prophets hammered out over and over again whenever the Jews, so proud of their being God’s Chosen, God’s specially called people, began to think of themselves as better than others. That they had a hot-line to God. It is an uncomfortable calling – to be open to those society despises, puts down, wants nothing to do with. It’s a message that we need to hear over and over and over again – perhaps especially in a cathedral.

Let me break off for a moment and tell a true story about a poor man and a cathedral. As I do so, bear in mind the reading from James about not showing favouritism to those who appear important. The Wellington City Mission in New Zealand is not unlike the Magdalene Centre. Help is offered to the down and outs, those who struggle to live in ‘normal’ society, those who live with addiction, mental health issues, domestic violence, poverty. Fr Des was the mission priest at the time when, on one occasion, he offered to kit out a particular man, very down on his luck, with some new clothes. The man was well known to Fr Des and had been helped many times. This time the man made a promise. In return for help he would be in church the following Sunday. Sunday came and no man appeared. A few days later Fr Des encountered the man and reminded him of his promise to be in church on Sunday. “Oh, but Father, I did go to church. Only I looked so smart in my new clothes that I went to the cathedral!” You can’t win them all.

The calling of the early Christians for whom Mark wrote was to open the Gospel to all people, Jew and Gentile. The calling of the ancient Jews was to stand with God on the side of the poor. Angela understands her calling to be that of clinician, employer, researcher, teacher and volunteer. For Tony God’s calling includes working with some of the most vulnerable people in our society – serving, mentoring, advocating, supporting them into as much independence as possible.

What of ourselves today? How do we hear God’s call? How do we respond to Jesus in our daily lives? How do we reach out to those who might be seen as ‘gentiles’, the ‘poor’, the Syrophoenician woman in our contexts?

I find myself challenged by the words of contemporary hymn-writer Brian Wren (in the words of today’s Gradual Hymn, Ancient & Modern No 620).

*Dear Christ, uplifted from the earth, your arms stretched out above
through every culture, every birth, to draw an answering love.*

*Still east and west your love extends and always, near and far,
you call and claim us as your friends and love us as we are.*

*Where age and gender, class and race, divide us to our shame,
you see a person and a face, a neighbour with a name.*

*May we, accepted as we are, yet called in grace to grow,
reach out to others, near and far, your healing love to show.*