

Chosen and called

Isaiah 6:1 – 8, Luke 5:1 – 11

Glenn Miles, a nurse from England, and his wife Siobhan, a physician's assistant from the US, led the Servants Pioneer team into Cambodia in 1993, after spending three and a half years in the refugee camps on the Thai-Cambodia border.

They lived among the poor there. Some thought that was because they had misbehaved in a previous life and were atoning for their sins. Some Christian missionaries felt judged for their own more comfortable lifestyles.

But Glenn and Siobhan simply wanted to follow Christ by "coming down from a high and privileged place" so they could develop friendships. They suffered a lot while there, including their first born baby's death, and Glenn having a fall which resulted in serious headaches and permanent deafness.

They went back to the UK, going through turmoil and doubt as they did so. Another position came up in Cambodia. So back they went now with two small children. This time they found a slightly more comfortable house where the poor as well as their colleagues would be comfortable to visit.

Then they were recalled to the UK. But not before local people had been trained and equipped to do the work themselves. Glenn and Siobhan were present when Servants Cambodia formally handed the work over to the locally formed TASK organisation.

Broken Dreams: A Journey into Suffering is the title of the article where Glenn tells their story.¹ Through the years, especially when things got really hard for Glenn and Siobhan, what kept them going was God's call upon their lives to serve the poor. They knew God had chosen them and were able to see the work in Cambodia through.

Knowing you are called and chosen is the basis for a robust Christian faith; a lively friendship with Jesus and honest growth in him. Without that assurance it is easy to become weak and fall away. However when we know we are called and chosen, we are free to accept the gifts Christ gives us along the way – whether or not they seem like gifts at the time. We are also able to obey the hard commands that come our way.

Do you remember a time when Christ called you? For most of us there was not a single time. Usually calling is a process rather than a singular call.

Pause and reflect for a moment. What has Christ called you to?

¹It is found in the book about Servants to Asia's Urban Poor: The Sound of World's Colliding published by Servants in 2010 and edited by Kristin Jack.

Isaiah six is arguably one of the most well-known in that book, perhaps along with the bit about the new things God is doing.

Behold (see), I am doing a new thing!

Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?

I am making a way in the wilderness

and streams in the wasteland. Isaiah 43:19

Earlier in the same chapter the Lord makes it clear he is talking to the nation he has called:

But now, O Jacob, listen to the Lord who created you.

O Israel, the one who formed you says,

“Do not be afraid, for I have ransomed you.

I have called you by name; you are mine.....

Of course the Israelites doubted that call. They doubted that they were chosen. So did Jesus’ disciples. So do we at times. At least most of us do. I wonder why we do that.

We see from Isaiah chapter six, being called and chosen very often involves a time of cleansing and/or preparation. Usually it involves both.

As Isaiah sees God’s holiness, his own unworthiness becomes obvious. So he makes his confession and receives God’s forgiveness and cleansing.

Now he can hear God’s call: ‘Whom should I send as a messenger?’

The now clean Isaiah has the courage to acknowledge that God has chosen him for the task at hand. He is the messenger to God’s generally called people. His humble response echoes down through the ages: “Here I am. Send me.”

The Lord details the specifics of Isaiah’s calling. He lays out the difficulties in the rest of the chapter. About now Isaiah might be regretting responding positively to the Lord!

Luke chapter five is all about Jesus’ choosing his followers. Later in the chapter Jesus calls and chooses Matthew. We are going to focus on his choice of Simon Peter though.

Luke records a slightly different version of how that calling to the other Gospel writers. In chapter one of Mark’s Gospel Peter, Andrew, James and John seem to respond immediately to Jesus call to be his followers. Matthew’s Gospel version (chapter 4) is very similar to Mark’s. John’s Gospel (chapter one) records it differently again.

However we needn’t be worried about different versions of the same event. Rather than disturbing us, it ought to reassure us about the validity of the Scriptures. Even today eye-witnesses notice different aspects of the same event.

If the Gospel writers were making up things, they would get come together to align their stories by making them identical. Instead they were happy with the different emphases in each version.²

If we examine the calls of the disciples, we see a series of events. They are all part of the chosen race of Israel. Individuals are called to follow Jesus. Then Jesus chooses the twelve disciples from the larger group of followers. They are to journey with him and be trained up as preachers of the Good News – no longer will they just be taught but they will teach others who Jesus us, what he did and what his purposes are.

But back to Luke chapter five: what key lessons do you think Jesus wants to teach Simon Peter and the others here? They could include things like:

Obedience – Jesus’ directs them where to fish

Humility – they are experienced fishermen and have worked hard all night

Reliance on Jesus rather than their own strength – they initially fail but succeed when they go where Jesus tells them

The need for faith – the nets are so full they begin to tear

Holy fear – the miracle is almost overwhelming

The call to follow Jesus is implicit in the story. Jesus words to Peter after he confesses his sinfulness and inability affirm that call.

‘Don’t be afraid. From now on you’ll be fishing for people.’ Matthew and Mark and Luke describe Peter’s immediate response as he leaves everything to follow Jesus. Much later, in John 21, Peter’s call becomes more specific as he is called to feed Jesus’ lambs.

All the way through Scripture we see God calling the most unlikely people don’t we? Old Abram and Sarai –become Abraham and Sarah – parents of a nation. Saul, the terrorist, becomes Paul; arguably the greatest disciple of all time.

Of course there are many modern examples too. Most of us are ordinary people chosen by God to live faithfully in our own context being a great parent or grandparent, worker, friend who witnesses to God’s love displayed in Jesus Christ. Others are chosen for more extraordinary roles: Mother Theresa, Rees Howells intercessor, the current Pope are some examples.

Whichever camp we fall into, every one of us here has been and is being called by God to follow Jesus; to seek first the Kingdom of God. That is the general call on our lives. We also have specific roles that we’ve been chosen for.

Mostly we are called to live for Jesus right where we are. As we age our calling often becomes more specific – almost always it includes the call to pray more and to love more intensely the people around us. Some of us here though, have been chosen for wider ministry roles.

² It is also possible these calls happened over a period of time rather than being a single event.

Whatever Jesus has chosen us for, we need to recognise our lack of ability, our sinfulness, and to rely on him to cleanse us, to equip us and to lead us.

Do you know what you have been chosen for? If you are not sure, this coming Lenten season might be a good time to ask the Lord for his clarification.

I have a destiny I know I shall fulfil
I have a destiny in that city on a hill
I have a destiny and it's not an empty wish
For I know I was born for such a time as this

Long before the ages You predestined me
To walk in all the works You have prepared for me
You've given me a part to play in history
To help prepare a bride for eternity

I did not choose You but You have chosen me
And appointed me for bearing fruit abundantly
I know You will complete the work begun in me
By the power of Your Spirit working mightily.

Mark Altrogge