

CALLINGS

The novel I finished last week was by Joanna Cannon, and it was called *Three Things about Elsie*. The central figure is actually called Florence; she lives in a rest home and she's the main narrator. She says this... 'I sometimes wonder what the point of me was. 'Does God have a plan, and where does he see me fitting into it?' I asked the vicar once. He came to the rest home with his leaflets, handing them around and trying to persuade us all into being religious. 'We each have a role to play, Miss Claybourne,' he said. 'Jesus loves everyone.' 'I'm sure he does,' I said. 'But love isn't enough is it? You need to have some kind of purpose. I was wondering what mine might have been?'

I looked at him. I thought he might give me an interesting answer. Something comfortable and reassuring. But he just checked his watch and started talking to Miss Honeyman about harvest festivals. So even the vicar doesn't know why I'm here. Elsie says I shouldn't dwell on things so much, but when you get to this age, it passes the time. 'There has to be a reason though, doesn't there?' I said to her once. 'Or have I spent the last 84 years just sitting in the audience?'

It's poignant, isn't it? 'I sometimes wonder what the point of me was....Have I spent the last 84 years just sitting in the audience?'

What's the point of you, and me, and the person sitting next to you? What are we meant to be? What are we called to be?

When Jesus heard that John had been killed he knew his moment had arrived. He left Nazareth, his home of 30 years, went down to the Sea of Galilee, to Capernaum, and began calling a team together. We call them the disciples. He saw Simon Peter and his brother Andrew, busy at their fishing business, and he called them. He saw James and his brother John, red-haired sons of Zebedee, and he called them too. He was assembling a team of friends with the intriguing invitation to fish for people rather than fishing for fish.

I've always been fascinated by the question of how and why Jesus chose those particular young men. What was it that made them the likely lads he wanted? On the face of it, they were not really likely lads at all; they were a pretty unusual bunch to bring together. Here's a spoof memorandum from Jordan Management Consultants based in Jerusalem, to Jesus, son of Joseph, at Simon's Fisheries, Capernaum...

'Dear Sir: Thank you for submitting the CVs of the 12 men you have picked for management positions in your new organisation. All of them have now taken our battery of tests; we have not only run the results through our computer, but also arranged personal interviews with our psychologist and vocational aptitude consultant. It is the staff opinion that most of your nominees are lacking in background, education and vocational aptitude for the type of enterprise you are undertaking. They don't have an understanding of teams. We would

recommend you continue your search for persons of experience in managerial ability and proven capability.

Simon Petr is emotionally unstable and given to fits of temper. Andrew has absolutely no qualities of leadership. The two brothers, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, place personal interest above company loyalty. Thomas questions everything in a way that would undermine morale. We feel that it's our duty to inform you that Matthew has been blacklisted by the Greater Jerusalem Better Business Bureau. James, the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddeus definitely have radical leanings and they both registered a high score on the manic-depressive scale.

One of the candidates, however, shows great potential. He's a man of ability and resourcefulness, meets people well, has a keen business mind and has contacts in high places. He is highly motivated, ambitious and responsible. We recommend Judas Iscariot as your chief executive and right hand man. We wish you every success in your new venture. Sincerely Yours, Jordan Management Company.'

These tough young men didn't yet know why they'd been called, nor did they know the dimensions of their call, but they found it irresistible.

So what about our calling? Have we thought about it? If so, is it irresistible?

Maybe there are three dimensions to our calling from God. *The first call is to be fully ourselves, the person God made, loves and wants to flourish.* The rabbis have a story from one of their number, Rabbi Zusya, who used to say that when he got to heaven they wouldn't ask why he wasn't Abraham or why he wasn't Moses. They would ask him, 'Why were you not Zusya?' Why had he not been the unique, creative, multi-faceted person he was made to be?

We need to come out from behind the masks we use to disguise and defend ourselves, and be fully alive as our best selves, in all our God-given originality. Being fully ourselves is the greatest privilege we could possibly have. And then making the most of everything we've been given. Another thing the rabbis say is that God's first question to us when we get to heaven will be, 'So, did you enjoy my creation?'

Great question! Have we? Do we? There's so much to enjoy all around us.

The second dimension of our call from God is to be a follower of Jesus Christ, to join Simon Peter, Andrew, James, John and all the rest, all the billions of followers who have found their deepest identity in being a Christian. These young men who first followed Jesus were carried along by the vitality of a leader whose presence brought God so near and made his will so clear that they felt the touch of heaven. The call to be a follower was irresistible.

And so it is, I hope, for us. There's much that could put us off. The siren call of a secular culture telling us that it's all make-believe. The doubts we carry ourselves. The other calls on

our time and commitment that crowd in on us all the time. The bad news of sexual abuse in churches and the dysfunctionality of congregations.

And yet... there's that continual tug of 'something more', that steady undertow of longing that we sense sometimes when we slow down, that compelling figure of Jesus who just seemed to 'get it right' when all around him were getting it wrong. There's that lurch of the heart, that song in the night, that beauty that feels like falling in love – these 'signals of transcendence' tell us that we belong somewhere else. We belong in the family of God and the company of Jesus.

And so I, like you, come to church, to realign ourselves with something bigger and better than ourselves, to re-set our compass, to restore our hope. I love the description of church that I heard last week, that a church is a place where children (and by extension all of us) can be told we are good and loved and beautiful. Please hear that.

So our second call is to be followers of Jesus Christ. Within that calling *is a third calling, to follow Jesus in a particular way*, which can mean anything from being on the coffee rota to being ordained, from being a Samaritan to being an honest and good employer. But I won't pursue that third calling on this occasion.

I'll just say this. Jesus found his chosen friends, his team, let him down, in some cases very badly. Did that mean he'd made a mistake in calling them? Of course not. They were human; they were often out of their depth; they melted in the fire of opposition. But did that define them? No. They were the friends Jesus had called.

And so are you and I. We get things wrong too. And sometimes very badly. But that doesn't define us. Back to Florence in her rest home. She's talking to Jack, a fellow resident, about a serious event in Florence's life. Jack says....'Every one of us is damaged. We need the faults, the breaks, the fracture lines.' 'We do?' I said. 'Of course we do. However else would all the light get in? You can't define yourself by a single moment.' Jack held my hand very tightly. 'That moment doesn't make you who you are.' 'Then what does?' I said. 'Oh, Florence. Everything else,' he said. 'Everything else.'

We all make mistakes in life, sometimes big ones. But they don't preclude us from knowing that we are good and loved and beautiful. There's so much more to us than the worst thing we've ever done.

What makes us who we are? Everything else. All that God has done, and is doing, in our lives every day as followers of Jesus.

Everything else.