

“The call to tend to our world” a sermon based on Acts 9:1-20 and John 21:1-19, preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on the third Sunday of Easter, 1 May 2022.

A colleague in Remuera, Glynn Cardy, recently quoted philosopher John Caputo: “If, on any given day, you go into the worst neighbourhoods of the inner cities (in the USA), the people you will find there serving the poor and needy, expending their lives and considerable talents attending to the least among us, will almost certainly be religious people — evangelicals and Pentecostals, social workers with deeply held religious convictions, Christian, Jewish, and Islamic, men and women, priests and nuns, black and white... That is because religious people are lovers... They are hyper-realists, in love with the impossible, and they will not rest until the impossible happens, which is impossible, so they get very little rest.”

Then Glynn says this about himself – “A mixed bag with barely any beliefs in common. Except that they care. They have compassion. They get off the couch, out of bed, and do something. And this is actually what matters more than anything else. They imagine the impossible, then try to bring it about.

Sometimes I lie awake thinking about all these things – the places and people without hope, the bombs, refugees, and suffering. And then I think too of those who haven’t given up, and those who haven’t given up on them. Those who believe in impossibles. The naïve. And I want to join them. I want to be a Christian. Again. And again. And again.”

What gets you off the couch, out of bed, to imagine the impossible? It is natural that in the week my retirement was announced, I have been reflecting on this question. At the heart of my life and at the heart of the church’s life is the concept of call, vocation if you will, that God calls us, to imagine the impossible.

I have heard people in the church pooh pooh the concept of call. Some approach it with cynicism that call never really happens, that what we do is really about ego and little else, especially if it involves leadership in some way. I have heard people suggest that what we do we planned to do all along, that there was no otherness involved at all, and that we are laying a religious veneer over what we had already chosen. If that is so, the church is in deep trouble because call is one of the key principles by which we approach life. I mean call in the broadest sense, not shrunk to the ministry of word and

sacrament. I have met people who see their Christian life as call in relation to parenting, in relation to their profession, in relation to their retirement. Because call is about all we are, not just what we do. We dramatize that in baptism. Our baptism marks God's call on our life to follow Jesus. The act of professing faith is our eventual acknowledgment of that call.

At the end of Matthew's gospel, the call is direct. It is a command - Go therefore and make disciples of all nations. Many people experience call that way – it is obvious what needs doing. Just do it. Not so for many. No so for me. So I relate to how John speaks of call, by telling a story. I want to demystify call, to enable each of us here relate to that principle in some way.

First, let me say some things about the readings. Paul's conversion can seem unique, yet aspects of it reflect what happens to many people, including me. And conversion continues. I was knocked off a high horse, metaphorically. I didn't need God. I didn't believe in God. And then I was brought down to earth, and not gently. Scales fell from my eyes. I could not understand the Bible at all. It made no sense. Then within a week or so, God used it to speak directly to me. And for Paul the conversion to Christ became conversion to the other, to the hated and despised. So for me, I was converted to love the people I had made fun of and laughed at. This is the story of a lot of people.

Then let's turn to John. John begins by saying "Jesus showed himself and he showed himself in this way." Every call in the church involves coming to terms with Jesus, a Jesus who shows himself to us, often through others, but also in our personal reading of scripture, in our personal praying, in our gathered worship, in conversation. One way or other, call is transmitted through an encounter with the living Christ. But as with the first disciples, it's not always easy to discern whether it is Jesus.

My call to ministry was like sandpaper, grit that would not go away. But how did I know it was a genuine call? Might it be ego? Might it be just a psychological trick I was playing on myself? So I asked others. My Christian friends said – don't do it – the institutional church is dying. Don't tie yourself to it. There are better ways ... this was the late seventies when there were new monastic movements especially in Australia and the United States. Australians like Athol Gill and Dave Andrews and John Smith of the radical discipleship movement, linked with base communities. That is where they saw the future of Christianity, and some of what we see now is much related to that movement. But I was in the institution, as an elder. And I loved the

interaction that came from the people for whom I had pastoral responsibility. And I had been invited to preach. There were lawyer friends who said, your call is to the law, to working within the system. And I loved the law very much. I enjoyed it. I kept wondering. I talked with my minister Scott McPheat who said he was not surprised and had been expecting this day. And I visited my previous minister, Owen Baragwanath, who said - don't go into the ministry if you can avoid it. And I said, Mr Baragwanath, it won't let me rest. So having decided, I spoke with the church committee and saw a psychologist and a counsellor and another senior minister. Then there was a process of assessment with a committee over a weekend. Until eventually I was accepted. And then every year of our theological education, the question was asked again. And then in being invited to the first congregation, the question was asked again. Every step of the way asking ... is this a genuine call of God? At no stage, did a divine megaphone answer yes. But once the church had made its decision, I trusted it, not without doubts. Trusting the church, it was a matter of - just do it. Don't look back. Get on with it. Call is greatly liberating in that respect.

What is here in the John reading? Community – standing around on the beach working out whether it is Jesus calling to them. They needed each other to discern that. Awkward, honest, real questions about what we are living for, giving ourselves to – Children, you have no fish, have you? What are you giving your life to? Is this what you are for? Challenge to act differently – cast your net on the other side of the boat. Don't just keep repeating the pattern, imagining the result will be different. Listen to those who keep pointing us to Christ – “The disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter – it is the Lord!”. Feeling afloat, out on the boat, even in shallow water, but untethered from what had been, set loose from the pattern we had developed, being questioned, challenged, confronted even. The everydayness of it, around the fishing net – how much is spoken to us in our everyday lives, so for me it was amid the practice of law, amid leading a youth group, amid the interactions I had outside the church – the call. And then in the dealing with personal issues – Peter had denied Jesus three times, and now he was being asked three times about his love for Jesus. Here was grace, love, inclusion of one who had denied Jesus. That is the call on our lives in whatever realm we serve, inside or outside the church. Call involves attending to our past, dealing with difficulty, receiving grace, again and again. Knowing that there will come a day when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will fashion a belt

around you. Reminding us how we depend on others. Call is not about us, our ego, our plans, for the day will come when others will lead us.

So then - who is God calling you to be in Christ? How is God calling you to live in Christ? What is God calling you to do with Christ?

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