

Sunday Worship for 27 June 2021
The Fourth Sunday after Trinity
From Sunderland Minster
Petertide: Listening to God's Call

SERMON

Rev Canon Stuart Bain, Provost of Sunderland Minster

Including Faith stories by Lillian Jordan Reader in training & Rev Chris Watson Minster Curate

Now, may I speak in the name of God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

So you're working on the seashore, doing your job as a fisherman. And Jesus comes along and invites you to join him. "Come and follow me," he says. And Peter does. This is a remarkable story. We don't know if Peter knew of Jesus or whether he'd heard him preach but the power of Jesus' call is so strong that Peter leaves his nets and begins a journey of faith. He's now on the road with Jesus and what a journey that will be. There will be joy and pain, grief and wonder, failure and triumph, and the continued call from Jesus to follow. For Peter, it began on the seashore. Where did it begin for you? We've heard from Zoe, how her life has been changed by the love of Jesus.

And how this gave her confidence to openly speak of her faith in baptism. She is on the road, walking with other disciples here at the Minster, together, seeking to be open to God, and open to all. We know as we read the gospels that Peter had a lot to learn. He's not always a great listener. He's impetuous, and he often gets the wrong end of the stick and misunderstands what Jesus says. But I find huge encouragement in the fact that he keeps at it. What a moment it must have been when he comes to a point and recognises Jesus to be the one. God's chosen. The Messiah. How he must have felt when Jesus calls him the rock. We know that it's a wobbly rock at times.

Remember the night before Jesus died? Under great pressure, he denies his Lord. And Jesus is crucified. But it's not the end. Jesus seeks him out in love after the resurrection. "Feed my sheep," he says to him. "Feed my sheep." Peter is to be the leader. One of the leaders in the church. Given power through the Holy Spirit to speak of Jesus with courage. Peter will be faithful even unto death. For Peter, his discipleship was to lead him into leadership. Jesus' call was to change the direction of his life completely. Listen to Lillian, another member of the Minster community and hear how God has been at work in her life.

My name is Lillian. I was born into a Christian family. Baptised in the Methodist chapel. Went to Sunday school. Was taught to recite the Lord's prayer by my Nana before I even started school. At a young age, I felt God calling me to the Church of England. And with my dad's permission, I began my Anglican journey of faith. I was confirmed at 12 years of age.

And I can still feel the wonderful warmth of the Holy Spirit through the hands of the Bishop as he laid his hands on my head. This is such a feeling, it's still with me today. My life took me to another part of the country to live. Where I found love and married my husband of 35 years. We have two children now grown with their own families. My journey brought me back to my roots where we have now lived for the last 32 years. The parish church I attended now was of the Anglo-Catholic tradition. Here I saw God at work in the poorest parishes, helping the poor and vulnerable in society. I felt God calling me to be part of his ministry. And here I trained as an APA.

I spent four wonderful years going out among the people of the parish and they came to know and trust me, they came to ask questions and ask for prayers. Some would just ask me to listen to their story, knowing they were speaking in confidence. This was a great privilege, feeling God's hands touching them through my mission in ministry. I began to feel a deep sense of God calling me to Reader ministry. I went to Lindisfarne College of Theology as an independent student, training alongside readers and Ordinands. During the second year of training, I was not able to afford to carry on as an independent. And I was guided by my tutor to speak with the DDO of Durham Diocese. This I did. And was that very same day, sent the forms to fill in and return for the Reader selection process. God guided me to the Minster Church in the city of Sunderland.

Here I am now a community Reader in training. The welcome and warmth I received here is of great spiritual depth, such a blessing. God's guiding hand through my journey of faith has now brought me to where I feel my journey can be completed. As a community Reader, I feel this to be a bridge in ministry, taking the gospels of Jesus's teaching out into the community, in the city where we have a wide diversity of people, of faith and no faith. The Minster is a place of welcome to the refugees in our city. This is such a blessing to be able to walk with them also to learn of their faith, as we are all children of God, the creator of all people. Also, the city has a lot of homeless sleeping in the streets in doorways. The Minster is an inclusive church that reaches out to all and welcomes all. I am inspired by our Northern Saints Bede, Cuthbert, Aiden, Chad, and Benedict Biscop who served and educated the people of the North. Such a journey of faith God has brought me through in my life. I feel he has now brought me to where he sees my ministry to be.

This time of the year. We will see many ordained as deacon and priest. We rejoice with them. We pray with them. And we give thanks for their response to God's call in their lives. Here's Chris, a member of the Minster team. In ordained ministry for just a short time, and in a pandemic.

God calls all of us in many different ways to fulfil many different roles in life. No one can claim any safety from God's plans for your life. No matter how young or old you are. Sometimes he shouts at you so you cannot ignore him. More often, it is through very gentle encouragement. But you must give yourself time to learn to listen to him. It is so too easy to say no and take the easy way out. But be sure, he never gives up and is waiting for your, 'yes Lord'.

Although I had always felt a gentle calling to Church Ministry, yet after initial probings in mid-life which led me to attaining a theology degree, I fought against God's call for many years. After a period of serious illness, I felt closer to Jesus. And had the distinct impression that he was supporting me and had a mission for me once I had recovered. Now retired, I thought God had forgotten me. But no, at the ordination of deacons in 2016 at Durham Cathedral, he called me in a very close, a very personal spiritual way, in a manner that left no room for me to say no. After 50 years as a server at God's altar, I was eventually ordained deacon myself at Michaelmas in 2019, and priested at Sunderland Minster, last Michaelmas under COVID restrictions.

It has been a very strange two years. Just as I was starting my ministry, we were all thrown into a series of lockdowns with only a few weeks grace in between to practise pastoral ministry face to face. Albeit behind face masks. My ministry has not been one that I had expected. No funerals, no christenings or weddings, but rather having to learn new IT skills to spread God's word through online services which reach out much further than our parish boundaries across the country and beyond. As well as learning to use Zoom for baptism and Bible classes, both in English and Farsi using interpreters. This has led me to baptising two Iranian and one Afghan refugee since lockdown was eased. This was all an experience which I will hold in my heart forever.

Jesus says, "Follow me." A call that echoes across the years from that seashore. Who knows where the call of discipleship will take us? As you walk with Jesus, know that he will ask things of you. Know that there will be things for you to do to share God's love. Be open to this and listen to that call. It will be costly. It will be hard. But there is always life, there for us, the abundant life of Jesus. On St Peter's Day, I will celebrate 40 years as a priest. All here in the Diocese of Durham. What a journey. Like Peter, there has been joy and sorrow. Pain and grief. Failure and successes. Soon, I will retire from full-time ministry. But I move into the next phase in the knowledge and the lived out experience that the one who calls is faithful. Is faithful. Always faithful. "Listen to me," Jesus is saying. "Listen to me." And the adventure will continue.

Amen.