

GUIDELINES

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Edited by **David Spriggs**

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David Spriggs writes...

‘Who do you say that I am?’ This question is put by Jesus to his disciples and is considered by Steve Motyer as he brings us to the conclusion of his studies on Mark 1—8. It is a question that as disciples we are always facing, and as ministers of the gospel we constantly need to refresh our understanding. We do this by re-engaging with the scriptures, which are our source of insight. Advent and Christmas provide us with a great opportunity to do this.

There are several weeks within these notes which help us achieve this. There is Andrew Lincoln’s examination of the flourishing or abundant life which Jesus came to bring us. This offers us an amazing insight into John’s Gospel and the incarnation. Along with this, there is the introduction to Luke’s Gospel by Steve Walton, looking at the Advent chapters, and my attempt to provide a more in-depth context for appreciating the nuances of the birth of Jesus by considering other ‘special births’ within the scriptures.

One of the new authors for *Guidelines* is Paul Bradbury, who has published a book with BRF on vocation (*Stepping into Grace*, 2016 – available to order on p. 151). As he seeks to elucidate the relationship between vocation and ambition, we are taken into some of the depths of Christ’s own ministry, helping us understand what it is to be ‘the Christ’.

Our faith is incarnational, so Fiona Gregson considers how the early church was an incarnational community – in the way that they shared their possessions with one another. Michael Parsons, who in a previous issue introduced us to Luther’s insights on prayer, now uses Calvin’s understanding of prayer to further sharpen an appropriate Christian spirituality.

Jesus made it very clear to his disciples that being ‘the Christ’ inevitably involved suffering. The Old Testament provides a rich context for grappling with this paradox that Peter and most Christians since have also struggled with. Kate Bruce’s contribution on Lamentations is truly helpful here.

Paul Hedley Jones explores how the prophets share in God’s passion for redemption: ‘Israel’s prophets are precursors to Jesus, whose prophetic ministry brings about the fulfilment of God’s passion to dwell on earth.’

Miriam Hinksman and Jeremy Duff both tackle challenging material. Miriam engages seriously with the text and challenges of Nahum and Obadiah. From her research into the book of Lamentations, she is well-placed to help us appreciate the distress which the other nations had brought to Israel when they invaded with arrogant and merciless brutality. Jeremy shares with us his deep appreciation of the biblical material surrounding gender issues. These contributions are vital for us if we are to be Christians committed to the Bible but aware of the challenges this can bring us.

A vocational journey

Paul Bradbury

Vocation is under threat. The very concept of vocation has less and less value in a world where results, targets and the bottom line so often determine the agenda of our workplaces. I speak with too many people who have a deeply held sense of vocation but are thinking of leaving their jobs, because they do not have space or time to give expression to what they feel called to do.

Yet vocation is at the heart of what it means to be human. Beginning with Abraham and throughout the story of the people of God, we see that we are people responding to a call, drawn onwards by the voice of God on a journey of discovery and change. And it is not just a call to do this or that, but a call to grow into the fullest expression of who we are. Vocation is as much about being as it is doing. Our call is not only to do great things for God, but to be that which only we can be, and be that as fully as we can.

The story of Jonah, that ancient and mysterious tale of shipwrecks, whales and curious vines, has so often been reduced to a series of events. But really the book is as much about process – the process of transformation that takes place in Jonah as these events unfold. It is a story about Jonah's vocation as a prophet, while his career as a professional royal adviser is dismantled by a new call of God.

In the next two weeks, we will journey with Jonah, exploring as we go various issues around Christian vocation. There will be a few detours from the text of Jonah but the thread of this extraordinary story will be our main guide.

Unless otherwise stated, quotations are from the New International Version (Anglicised).

1 Ambition

Jonah 1:1–3

The first word of the book of the prophet Jonah is a clue to the reader that this is no ordinary prophetic book. It is a word lost from some translations, including the NIV, but it is there in, for example, the NRSV: ‘Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah.’ That little word ‘now’ causes a complete divergence from the usual form. It tells us that this book is something rather different, because what we receive in some of our English translations as ‘now’ might well be translated as ‘once upon a time.’ Hence *The Message* translates this verse: ‘One day long ago, God’s Word came to Jonah.’ We are being told a story. It is a story not so much about what Jonah says, or even what he does, but about what happens to him and how he responds.

Jonah is indeed a prophet. A little background research reveals that he was a prophet in the court of Jeroboam II during his reign over the northern kingdom of Israel. In 2 Kings 14:25, we are told that Jeroboam ‘restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Dead Sea, in accordance with the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai’. Jonah was perhaps a kind of divine adviser to the king’s military ambitions. And, by all accounts, he was a rather good one and it may have served him rather well. He has perhaps built a rather comfortable career from speaking into the royal court. But all that is about to change.

Into this setting comes a new call from God: a new expression of Jonah’s vocation and an invitation into a new context. He is asked to go and speak to the people of Nineveh – the capital of Assyria and the seat of power of Israel’s greatest threat. By all accounts, this is a harsh and cruel regime. This is a vocation that, by the nature of its extraordinary challenge, puts everything about Jonah’s call and career under threat. So he runs the other way.

Often, we make a distinction between vocation and ambition, as though vocation were somehow a holy thing and ambition its unholy opposite. But in Jonah we see a gift ambitiously expressed in one context being called into another. In this new context, everything is threatened, even life itself, while (as we shall see) vocation is enhanced. Ambition is not, then, a dirty word. We are called to express our gifts to the utmost. However, God is just as concerned with who we can become as what we can achieve.

2 Ambition in creation

Genesis 1:27–2:25

We detour from the story of Jonah for a couple of days in order to explore the relationship between ambition and vocation. To understand this relationship more deeply, we need to start at the beginning. The two creation stories offer two different perspectives on the role and place of humanity in creation.

The first narrative contains God's charge to humanity to 'fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground' (1:28). The emphasis of this account is on an active engagement in the stuff of creation. It is an invitation to work with the resources of creation, an invitation that is at the heart of the great achievements and innovations of humanity – and yet, also, some of its greatest abuses.

The second narrative, however, seems to focus more on relationship. Humankind is created and invited to engage in a relationship of care and harmony with creation (2:15). Adam's cry is for relationship with his fellow humans: for community in a lonely world. The invitation is to serve others in the cause of harmony and balance.

Neither of these roles is more moral or more desirable than the other; they are both part of how we are created. But they do live in apparent contradiction to one another. We are driven to create, to subdue, to use our intellect and ingenuity in the use of the materials we find around us in creation. We often call this ambition. However, we are also created to serve, to surrender, to relate, to offer something of that same self in sacrifice to the wider good, the broader community. Perhaps the word for this is vocation.

Vocation, then, is not a more moral alternative to ambition. Rather, vocation is the expression of ambition through the lens of sacrifice and service, through the prism of self-giving. We do not have to dump ambition at the threshold between one and the other; rather, ambition begins to take on a more mature form, still benefiting from the drive of the charge to subdue and create, but transformed and redeemed by a deeper call to offer one's gifts and talents in the service of others.

3 Jesus and ambition

Philippians 2:1–11

The relationship between ambition and vocation we explored yesterday is exemplified in the person of Jesus. This journey is a paradoxical one whereby the offering to God of our drive and ambition in the service of others creates space for the maturing of our gifts into a vocation. This is the way of Christ, the paradox of life laid down, life lost to discover life regained. This journey is expressed perfectly in the early church hymn of Philippians 2.

Jesus models the vocational journey. The awesome creativity and ingenuity of our ambition can tempt us towards 'equality with God' (v. 6). Jesus chooses to let go of that equality and models a life of service and sacrifice. He is confronting precisely the contradiction in our nature that the two creation accounts point to. He chooses servanthood and he accepts the humility of suffering and death, because to be fully human is to offer our very nature, with all its gifts and God-giveness, to others. Now the descendent journey is transformed into one of exaltation as he is lifted once again 'to the highest place' (v. 9) and given the position of ultimate honour where all humanity will come to acknowledge that he is Lord (vv. 10–11).

The journey from ambition to vocation begins with letting go. There is a distinct change of direction, a definite change of gear, when we begin to walk in vocation rather than ambition. Ambition is largely self-driven. We are motivated by something within us, something we struggle perhaps to articulate. It feels like something we must do, something that feels at first exciting and all-consuming. We are the ones pushing and urging ourselves on to achieve better and greater things.

The second part of the journey is different. The energy for the journey comes from somewhere else: from outside ourselves. We choose to lose ourselves, lay down our agendas and our goals, and listen to a different voice. We respond to the voice of God calling, even when it will call us beyond ourselves. This call draws on the material which has been driving us on so far, our natural gifts, talents and desires. Our true vocation is not something disconnected or different from our ambition. Rather, it is an ennobling, a transformation of our created qualities in all their raw material. If we let him, God will take these up and into his desires and his ambitions.

4 Flight

Jonah 1:3–5

Back to the story of Jonah, in which his call to preach to the Ninevites is also a call to lay down his ambitious self and discover a deeper expression of his vocation. We do not let comfort and equilibrium go without a fight, however. And Jonah's call upward is met with a journey of descent down to the coast at Joppa (v. 3), on to a boat bound for Tarshish and 'down into the inner part of the ship' (v. 5, ESV) where he 'lay down and fell into a deep sleep' (v. 5).

Jonah's flight in the opposite direction is a desperate attempt to avoid God but, more fundamentally, it is an attempt to avoid the deep personal implications of the call God has made on his life. His choice of a ship to Tarshish is no accident. Tarshish was the land on the edge of the world, a land of myth and promise far, far away, laced with all the delicious uncertainties of the unknown, without the pressing responsibilities of the here and now. We all have a Tarshish – that place we dream of going to when it gets too much: stacking shelves in Tesco; retiring early; the next job that will surely be free of all that irks us in this one.

Anna Synletica, one of the mothers of the early desert monastic movement, gave this advice: 'If you are living in a monastery, do not go to another place. It will do you a great deal of harm.' This wisdom flew in the face of the constant temptation among many to avoid facing the challenges that their vocation was forcing them to face, and to find somewhere else less challenging. The advice grew, eventually, into the Benedictine vow of stability that advocated a commitment to staying.

In our mobile world of infinite opportunity, it is all too easy to run away. Our egos will scream at us to flee when something deeply precious within us, that we won't give up without a fight, is threatened by the call of God. Yet God, in his insistent wisdom, is calling us upward and onward, inviting us through challenges that often seem beyond us, to discover new depths to the possibilities of our vocation. Sometimes this may well look like moving on, doing a new thing. But often it means staying, resisting the urge to run away, and allowing God to change us in the midst of where we already are.

5 Learning to fall

Jonah 1:6–17

While Jonah has been doing all he can to run away from God and his vocation, a storm has been brewing. This storm is not by chance; it is the providence of God (v. 4): the first in this story of a series of interventions in the natural world by God that are invitations for Jonah to grow, change and be transformed.

None of us welcome storms. We endure storms. Our theology of storms may well be that God is in our storms – an anchor in the storm – helping us get through it. But is God a provider of storms? Well, here he is, and this episode might well invite us to recognise our own experiences of storms for what they often are: opportunities for personal and spiritual growth.

For it is in the midst of this storm that a new journey begins for Jonah. It is the captain of the ship who demands that Jonah ‘get up’ and ‘call out to [his] God’ (v. 6, ESV). The irony of this would not have been lost on the original readers of the story, for this invitation is a deliberate reference to God’s call on Jonah to ‘Arise, go...’ (v. 2, ESV) – only this time it is a pagan sailor making the invitation!

Stripped of the comfort and familiarity of political and religious life in Israel, with the storm raging around him and the container of his last attempt at self-determination beginning to sink beneath him, Jonah is invited to make a choice. Under interrogation from the sailors, he makes his confession: ‘I am a Hebrew’ (v. 9). Is this a sincere confession? I believe so: these are the words of a man who realises he now has nowhere else to go except in the direction of the God he reluctantly believes in. These words are the first tentative step towards not just confessional belief but relationship with a God who calls and provides.

And it took a storm to do it. Julian of Norwich once said, ‘First there is the fall, then we recover from the fall. Both are the mercy of God!’ Our experiences of storms, disaster, failure and falling are not aberrations to the work of God’s mercy and grace. So often they are the necessary context in which his grace can be fully expressed, for they do what nothing else can do to bring us to our senses and step into the reality of what we say we believe.

6 Embracing the darkness

Jonah 2

Some have argued that the psalm of Jonah chapter 2 is a later insertion, it being so different in style from the rest of the book. But perhaps the story shifts from prose to poetry for a reason: to slow us down. This is the very heart of the story, the hinge point, the place where we arrive at the crux of the matter. This moment demands our attention. And, like Jonah, if we are to step back from our busyness and self-importance long enough to allow God to meet us, we need to slow down and be deeply attentive.

The work of theologians such as Claus Westermann and Walter Brueggemann has helped identify categories of psalms. Some psalms express thanks and praise to God. Others express protest and lament. Others, sometimes called ‘psalms of reorientation’, express wonder, surprise and awe at an intervention of God that has established a new state of well-being, peace and prosperity. The psalm of chapter 2, as Jonah descends into the darkness, the stench and the near-certain death of the digestive tract of a whale, ought, you might think, to elicit a psalm of lament. But no, this psalm, most of the language of which is drawn phrase by phrase from the psalms of Jonah’s worshipping tradition, is in the form of a psalm of reorientation.

So it is in the darkness, the danger and the near-death experience of the whale that Jonah finds his voice of faith. At the rock-bottom moment in the story, having reached the ‘roots of the mountains’ (v. 6), the journey turns; there is revelation, a new insight, a new commitment. ‘But you, Lord my God, brought my life up from the pit,’ says Jonah (v. 6b) – and it is indeed Jonah, for these lines are no quotation; they are new, the genuine utterance of our diffident prophet. He has found his voice and, perhaps with it, a new confidence in his vocation.

Again, as with the storm of the previous chapter, it is negative experience that brings Jonah to this moment of epiphany. Darkness, so frequently shunned in our world of artificial lights and bright distraction, is the context for spiritual growth and discovery. Darkness, be it real or metaphorical, is an experience rich with potential for the presence of God and the transforming power of God. Darkness slows us, disarms us, makes us vulnerable and impotent – just the kind of effect needed to bring us to our senses and bring us to God.

Guidelines

Frederick Buechner wrote that 'vocation is the place where our deep gladness meets with the world's deep need'. The church has often implied that 'vain ambition' needs to be ignored and rejected in order to pursue a vocation. However, the story of Jonah, chiming with the creation narratives, suggests that our ambition is very much part of the material for the shaping of our vocation. The dynamic journey between one and the other is exemplified by the person of Jesus. As you reflect on this story, how do you respond? Are you ambitious? What are you ambitious for? How might your ambition relate to your own journey of vocation?

Jonah's flight was in response to a call he could not face. Tarshish becomes a metaphor for all the places we sometimes want to run to when the call on our lives seems beyond us. Do we have a Tarshish, real or imaginary? When we are tempted to go there, what effect does it have on our ministry? In what ways might God be at work in us as we grapple with the challenges before us?

For Jonah, a storm and the dark recesses of a great whale brought about a radical repentance and change of direction. How do you respond to the experience of storms in your life? What about darkness? Are they experiences to be ignored, resisted? Do we tend to soldier on regardless? What if God might be speaking to you? What if the difficulties and uncertainties you face are part of God's way of shaping who you are?

Perhaps spend some time reflecting on this and offering your response to God in prayer.



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