

Called to be Saints

A Sermon by Richard Bauckham

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

In the ancient world, if you wrote a letter, you would always start it in a standard way: you would name yourself, name your recipient, and give a greeting. So if Paul is writing to the church in Corinth, you would expect him to say this:

From Paul

To the Corinthians

Greetings!

Or, since Paul was Jewish, you might expect him to use the Jewish greeting: Mercy and peace.

But what Paul actually does in all his letters is to turn this standard formula into something much more meaningful. Indeed, he packs it with meaning. One of the things he does is to bring God into it. So, instead of "Greetings" or "Mercy and peace" (which in Jewish use was implicitly a prayer) he always says: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." (and sometimes he expands that). When he introduces himself at the very beginning of the letter, he says he is an apostle of Jesus Christ, called by God – or something to that effect. He does that because it is in that capacity that he writes. He's not just sharing some news or some ideas. He's carrying out his vocation to preach the Gospel and to care for the churches he has founded. And by the way Paul usually names not just himself but also one or two other members of his missionary team, as he does in 1 Cor.

Then, rather than just naming his recipients, he says something a good deal more meaningful about them. Even if he only says "to the church of God in [Somewhere]" or "to the saints who are in Christ Jesus in [Somewhere]" he's saying something about their Christian identity, who they really are in relationship to God. He is God's apostle – they are God's people. That's why he writes to them.

As well as expanding the opening formula of his letters in those kinds of ways, Paul also invented a particular way of following on from the opening formulas and beginning the letter. He gives thanks to God – and at some length. Most often he thanks God for the Christians he's writing to, for how God has blessed them, for their faith and their life together as God's people. We read that part of Paul's first letter to the Corinthian Christians, and it's especially notable there, because if you read on in that long letter you'll find that Paul has a lot of serious criticisms to make of how these Christians are behaving. There are a lot of things he wants to

put right in Corinth. But in this opening thanksgiving for them he is entirely positive. Not a word of criticism. And he's full of hope for their future because they *are* God's people and God is faithful to his people and will fulfil his purpose for them. He wants the Corinthians to have that context in which to put the difficult things he also has to say to them later. It's a very good pastoral practice.

So in our reading from 1 Corinthians we had the opening formulas and the thanksgiving. Looking at how Paul starts this particular letter I was struck by the way one word recurs – it's the word "call". He begins: "Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God." He goes on: "To the church of God in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints." And then if we look down to the end of our reading, we find Paul concludes his thanksgiving by saying that these Christians "were called into the fellowship of God's Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (v 9).

I thought it would be good to think a bit about that word "call" and in particular our own calling to be Christians, because what Paul said to the Corinthian Christians certainly applies to us too. In ordinary language we talk about someone's "calling" – but perhaps more often we use the word vocation, which really means "calling" (it's from the Latin word for "call"). What do we mean by a vocation. We sometimes talk about a particular sort of occupation or career as a vocation – as when we speak of "vocational training," for example. But if we say that someone's chosen line of work is their vocation, we mean a bit more than just occupation or profession. We think of it, probably, as something lifelong or at least potentially lifelong. And we also think of it as something more than just a way of earning money, necessary though that may be. It's something someone does because it's worthwhile. It's a contribution to the common good. And for that reason it's fulfilling. If someone finds their vocation in life, they are finding something that suits their particular gifts and matches them, as it were, with something really worth doing. In that sense, it needn't even be a paid job. Someone may work to earn some money, but really devote themselves to something they do without remuneration. I said "devote themselves" because I think one last ingredient in what we mean by vocation is commitment or dedication. That's why we tend to think of vocations as roles that require some degree of dedication – stereotypically doctors, nurses, teachers, but really of course a great many other things too.

The way people now use the word vocation actually seems a bit odd if we think of what the word basically means – calling. To be called you have to be called *by someone*. So a vocation ought to be, not just something one finds or chooses, but something that one finds oneself called to be or do *by ... who?* Well of course that's a clue to the fact that this whole idea of vocation has Christian origins and ultimately comes from the New Testament.

So let's go back to Paul. Paul is very conscious of his own special calling to be an apostle, but he also talks about a vocation that applies to all Christians – and in

fact actually defines what a Christian is. Christians, he says, have been “called to be saints”. That’s another word with a long history. We’ve come to use it to describe just those special people who get to have ST put in from their names. St Mark, for example. Or (to come up to date) St Teresa – as Mother Teresa got to be called as from last year. The logic of that usage is that these people are exemplary Christians. They are people we can look at and see with special clarity what it means to be a Christian. But Paul calls all Christians saints. The word actually means holy. The saints in the NT are the holy ones or God’s holy people. It means they are the people set apart for God, dedicated to God. Holy is not the same as good. You can be a good person without being a Christian, but you can’t be a holy person because to be holy is to be dedicated to God. Dedication to God *produces* goodness. We should expect holy people to be loving and honest and generous and patient and all those things. But holiness itself is something else: it refers to a life dedicated to God, given over to God.

Another interesting point about that word saints or holy ones. Paul uses it frequently, but he nearly always uses it in the plural. For Paul the saints are God’s holy people – like Israel in the OT, a people set apart for God, dedicated to God. Really no Christian is called simply to be a saint. Every Christian is called to be a member of God’s holy people. Remember that other phrase Paul used, at the end of our reading, that we “were called into the fellowship of God’s Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” Fellowship – Paul’s word means “sharing”. We could say the common life that we share with each other and with Jesus Christ among his people.

In a way that’s what God says to each of us at our baptism: Now you belong to my holy people. God himself has consecrated us, dedicated us, and *a life* of dedication to God must follow.

Does that sound terribly daunting, altogether too demanding? Christians in the middle ages tended to think you could only be properly dedicated to God if you joined a religious order as a nun or a monk or a friar or something like that – because otherwise you will be distracted by other things – by family and work and so forth. So the word vocation came to be associated specially with a vocation to the religious life. Only monks and nuns had really answered God’s call to dedicate their lives to him.

Something important the Reformers did for us (Luther and Calvin and others) was to reclaim the word vocation as something for all Christians. Actually they more or less invented the idea of ordinary occupations as vocations to which we are called by God. The Christian vocation of dedication to God can be lived out in our callings to be farmers or merchants or politicians and also in marriage and parenthood and many other things that for Christians are ways of serving God and loving our neighbours. As far as the religious orders go, I think the Reformers threw out the baby with the bathwater. They could have retained that kind of vocation not as a *superior* way of being a Christian but as one way in which God calls people to live out a life given over to him.

The Christian vocation takes many different forms and God equips us with different gifts for living it out in different ways. The key thing I think is that it can include the whole of our lives. All sorts of good things become even better when they take their place within a life committed to God. Does it sound daunting or demanding? Maybe, but another way of putting it is this. The Christian vocation encompasses the whole of our lives and so it gives meaning and purpose to the whole of our lives. Nothing else is big enough to do that. Try making work the only source of meaning and purpose in your life – what happens when you can't work? Try making relationships or family the only source of meaning and purpose in your life – what happens when people die or no longer need you or want you? And in any case, more importantly, don't these things go wrong when we depend on them so absolutely? We can spoil them by requiring them to bear too much weight. The Christian vocation can include these things and give an overall shape to our lives. It's a shape that changes and develops as we form it in an ongoing engagement with God.

Let me end with a simple suggestion. Many of you will not need this suggestion, you're way beyond it, but here it is for anyone it could help. We're often told to start the day with prayer. But for so many people it's the most hectic time of day. Or maybe early morning just doesn't work for you. You're too bleary eyed for too long. I think we could all get into a simple habit of saying to God just this: "Lord I dedicate this day to you. Help me to live it for you." I think that could make a difference to all our lives.