

Vocation – a two-sermon series

Often when Christians think about vocation, they think of someone being called to full-time Christian ministry, or perhaps to one of the caring professions. In fact, in terms of work or occupations, God calls us to live out our faith in every area of life. People can be called by God to be bankers, artists, teachers, musicians, landscape gardeners, parents and so on. This breadth of vocation is not often explored within the church, so here are two sermon outlines that will enable you to go a little deeper into the subject with your congregation.

People within the congregation will be in diverse situations – some will be in paid employment, some unemployed, some will be caring for children or relatives, some will be retired, some studying and so on. Be clear that paid employment is not more important than any other activity nor is it the only place where callings can be worked out.

- ◆ **Sermon one: The nature of vocation**
- ◆ **Sermon two: Discovering our vocation**

Sermon one: The nature of vocation

Aim: to explore the meaning of 'having a vocation' in a way that is relevant to every Christian.

Bible passages

Read selected verses from the book of Nehemiah to give an overview of the story.

First reading: Nehemiah 1:1-4; 2:1-6, 11-18; Explain that Nehemiah organised the people into groups and they each repaired the section of the wall near where they lived. Then read Nehemiah 6:15-16.

Second reading: Nehemiah 5:1-12

Preparation

- The *Transforming Lives* website has a helpful section covering the theme of vocation www.transforminglives.org.uk/call_vocation.php. It might be useful to read the background notes to this Toolkit, [Thinking about vocation](#).
- Decide which of the ideas, illustrations and activities you will use and make the necessary arrangements
- Preview clips from the DVD: *Why I became a teacher* and *Christian Teachers Transform Lives*

Illustrations and activities

Some suggestions for illustrations and activities are given throughout the text. Choose a few that will suit your congregation.

Sentences in italics are instructions.



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1. General introduction

Nehemiah had a job; it was a good job but it was probably a job we would not want. He was cupbearer to the King. This was an important job but it did have certain drawbacks; the cupbearer had to taste the king's wine to make sure there was no poison in it. We do not know if Nehemiah had any choice about his job – he was one of the Jews deported to the east (to the country we call Iran) when Israel had been conquered.

More choice, we are told, is good. Many people, especially those whose choices are limited, would agree. They feel trapped and powerless in situations where they have few options. Too much choice, however, can paralyse and make life more difficult. Consider the modern supermarket. Shopping used to be so simple; now we are confronted with a range of choices that demand decisions. What do you buy: organic, healthy option, fair-trade, the cheapest, what the family will actually eat?

The same is true of work. In many parts of the world there is no choice – you do what you need to do to survive. For some in our country there are few choices. For others, the fact that we can choose different avenues of work presents us with decisions that are not always easy.

Choices for all of us are limited. We might be presented with a bewildering array of food in the supermarket but even there our choices are limited by the money at our disposal and our likes and dislikes. Our choice of work is similarly limited by our gifts, abilities, qualifications and the opportunities available to us.

2. Introducing vocation

For the Christian there is an even more difficult decision to make, not only 'What do I want to do?' but 'What does God want me to do?' or 'What is my vocation?' Vocation is a word that people often relate to work, and for some people it means a certain type of work, but the idea of vocation actually covers far more than our working lives. The word 'vocation' just means 'call'. As Christians we all have a vocation, a calling to be faithful to God, to love God and our neighbour. This is our primary calling. However, loving God and neighbour needs some concrete expression.

People who eat meat (non-vegetarians) don't actually eat 'meat'; they eat lamb and chicken, beef and pork. You can't order a kilo of 'meat', you have

Suggestions for illustrations and activities

Visit your local supermarket or an online supermarket site and count how many different options there are for one simple item, like mayonnaise. Give a few examples in the sermon: mayonnaise, extra light mayonnaise, reduced calorie light mayonnaise, French mayonnaise, thick and creamy mayonnaise, organic mayonnaise, olive oil mayonnaise, mayonnaise in a glass jar, in a squeeze bottle, in a tube, in an upside down bottle – and that's before you get onto the different brands available.

Ask people to discuss in twos or threes what comes to mind when they hear the word 'vocation'. Get some feedback using a roving mike.



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to be specific. We can talk generalities but we can't live them. We express our love of God through our relationships with friends and family, through work and leisure, through voluntary work in church and society. We all have a primary vocation but the difficulties come in deciding where and how we live it out.

Where and how we live out our primary vocation is sometimes called our 'station' in life or our *specific* vocation: a mum, a teacher, a receptionist, a volunteer, etc. The word station means 'The place where we keep watch'. In the Bible Nehemiah 'kept watch' from two different stations, first as a cupbearer to the king, then as Governor of Israel. In our different stations in life we too can 'Keep watch for the Lord' looking for where we can serve, where we can transform a situation for God, where good needs affirming, where wrong needs challenging.

Finding our station in life, our specific vocation, is not always easy; we need to explore how we think about the world, our faith and our work in the world.

We're going to watch a clip where teachers talk about how they discovered their vocation to teach, and the challenge of following that vocation. The issues they raise are relevant to all of us, whatever job or occupation we have.

3. Key ideas for understanding vocation

3a. All of life. Vocation is not just for the clergy or the caring professions. All of life can be an expression of our vocation. Being a parent, a factory worker and, as you saw in the DVD clip, being a teacher can all be vocations. Some jobs may present more opportunities than others, but in any station we can live out our primary calling. Being a cupbearer was no less a vocation than being a governor for Nehemiah.

3b. We live in a broken world, a Humpty Dumpty world and God calls us to work with him putting the pieces back together again, mending broken hearts and broken relationships. That is part of our primary vocation that can be expressed in work and home. Nehemiah did not only mend broken walls. He drew the people back together again as he tackled the divisions in society caused by oppression, debt and slavery.

Read a list of well-known meat dishes replacing the specific type with the word 'meat' – for example meat chops, meat au vin, meat Wellington, meat bourguignon, meat kiev, meat chasseur. Ask people to replace the word 'meat' with the correct type. You can't order just 'meat' in a butcher's or restaurant; you can only order chicken, lamb, beef and so on. We can talk generalities but we can't live them.

Show clip one from the DVD – [Christian Teachers Transform Lives](#).

Invite people to write on post-it notes ways in which the world is broken. They could think specifically about the areas that they work in, or the causes that they feel most passionate about. Invite them to come and stick these on an image of the world at the front of the church. Encourage people to think about how they can contribute towards mending that brokenness.



3c. Bearing God's image. All people are made in the image of God, but that image has been spoiled by sin. As Christians we can celebrate good wherever we find it – the evidence of the image of God still there in people. We can also challenge wrong where that image is marred. Nehemiah was not afraid to challenge those who were charging such high rates of interest that people were forced to sell their children into slavery to pay their debts. As Christians we are being changed; God's image should be getting stronger in us so that we can show Christ-likeness to others.

3d. God is restoring the world. God is making all things new, a process that will only be complete in heaven. We can be part of that process. Just as Nehemiah worked in partnership with God to restore Jerusalem, so we can work with God to restore people to wholeness, to help them to be all that God created them for. We can offer people a 'taster' of a new way of living based on God's Kingdom values of love, justice and peace. One headteacher on the DVD clip *Christian Teachers Transform Lives* talked about Christian teachers building their ethos on Christian values "which enables the Spirit to work through them and the children to flourish". It is giving a hint of things to come. We do not have to accept the world as it is. Family life, friendships and work can all be different. Nehemiah did not accept the state of Jerusalem as he found it. The way things are now, is not the way things have to be.

3e. Being a caretaker. Adam was called to be a steward of the garden, a caretaker. Nehemiah cared, when he heard about the state of Jerusalem he wept and mourned. When he arrived in Jerusalem he set about caring for the city and its people. We too are caretakers in God's world and this attitude can mark our ministry, taking care of the world and the people in it.

3f. Faith and life are not separate. Thomas Jefferson, an American President, declared that there should be a 'wall of separation' between church and state. Sometimes Christians put a 'wall of separation' between their faith and the rest of their lives. Faith is not private and separate from what we do outside church. Nehemiah's faith affected his work. If a person is a teacher, being a Christian makes a difference in the classroom on Monday morning. If a person is a factory worker, being a Christian makes a difference in the factory on Monday morning. Our world is becoming more and more secular. Faith is being squeezed out of life and is seen as a hobby for the few. Part of our vocation is reclaiming the world for God. It's

Ask some people to have a 'taster' of something bigger but only invite people who actually like the product. After they have had a taste, ask if they would like more – for example

- *A small piece of high quality chocolate from a bigger bar*
- *A small sip of high quality juice from a larger carton*



pressing the rewind button; it's stopping the retreat and saying that no part of life is beyond the love of God: not the factory or the office, the classroom or the building site.

3g. Faith is being in the world but not of it.

Christ was born in a stable among the animals and the poor. He arrived in the middle of a census called by the secular power – the Romans. God was in the thick of it. He was Immanuel, 'God with us'. We too can serve 'in the thick of it' rather than retreat from the world. We can serve in the home, the clinic and the classroom.

3h. Images we use matter. Often we think of life as a battle, and the Bible does use the battle image for life (Ephesians 6:10-17), but if we *only* think of faith and the world in terms of a battle then other people become 'the enemy' and relationships can become difficult. The Bible has many images for working in the world; one of those is the servant, this allows us to relate to others in a more positive way. We are called as Christians to be servants; but to serve as Christians (Isaiah 42:1-4) means we serve with certain values. As Christians we, like Nehemiah, are cupbearers – cupbearers of God's love to the world because that love has been given to us full and running over (Psalm 23:5).

3i. Vocation is bigger than paid work.

Sometimes our paid employment, such as teaching, is the place where we can express ourselves and use our gifts in the service of God and others. However, not all paid employment allows people to express their gifts; some jobs are monotonous and repetitive and allow little freedom. Vocation has to be seen as a wider calling than paid employment. For some their vocation, the thing their heart burns for, may be outside their job. Paid employment is where they can earn money in order to support themselves and others and have the freedom to serve in other capacities. That does not mean they do not have a vocation to live out their Christian calling at work, it just means that the opportunities to do this are limited. In such situations relationships, integrity and doing a job well are still important.

3j. Work is not outside God's values. Although all life can be sacred, that does not mean every activity is right. God may call people to teach or to be engineers or express their calling in the family but he does not call people to be burglars or prostitutes.

Use members of the congregation to create a wall from cardboard boxes between two people: one holding a card saying FAITH, the other holding a card saying LIFE. The wall can then be knocked down.



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3k. Work has meaning in God's big story. Work can be given greater meaning by faith; it can be seen as part of God's big story of redemption – putting the world to rights. We are one piece of a much bigger jigsaw. Teaching a class of teenagers, working alongside them, showing them the love of God, contributing to their knowledge about God's world, bringing up these youngsters to know and give love; all of these can be our way of contributing to the big picture. Sometimes that will be a real challenge, as we saw on the film clip. Angharad said that in her first year of teaching she felt she had been 'stretched where she didn't feel stretchy'. But with God's help we will rise to the challenge and grow through the experience.

4. Summary

For all of us, our primary calling is to love and to serve God. But then each of us needs to discover our 'station' or specific vocation – the area of life where we are called to live out that primary calling. It's not easy, but let's pray that as we explore this theme together as a church, God will give us wisdom and will confirm to each of us where he wants us to serve him. And let's support and encourage one another as we explore and discover our callings.

Create a blank jigsaw by cutting up a large sheet of card. People can write on the pieces or draw images to show their part in the bigger picture, e.g., something they do at work, in the home or in voluntary work that contributes towards the coming kingdom of God.

Acknowledgements

This sermon draws on the work of the following authors:

Hardy, L. (1990) *The Fabric of this World* (Eerdmans)

Schultze, Q. (2005) *Here I Am* (Baker Books)

Schuurman, D. (2004) *Vocation: Discerning our Callings in Life* (Eerdmans)



Sermon two: Discovering our vocation

Aim: to explore how we discover the situation where God is calling us to work out our vocation.

Bible passages

Use the same readings as in the previous sermon, to enable people to dwell with the story of Nehemiah.

First reading: Nehemiah 1:1-4; 2:1-6, 11-18; Explain that Nehemiah organised the people into groups and they each repaired the section of the wall near where they lived. Then read Nehemiah 6:15-16.

Second reading: Nehemiah 5:1-12

Preparation

- The *Transforming Lives* website has a helpful section covering the theme of vocation www.transforminglives.org.uk/call.php. There are also background notes to this Toolkit, [Thinking about vocation](#).
- You may like to consult the *Transforming Lives* [quiz](#) which is included as part of the Toolkit. This is designed to help people think through whether teaching might be a vocation for them. It could be used during the sermon or as an activity elsewhere in the service to explore the question 'what sort of person is called to be a teacher?'
- Decide which of the ideas, illustrations and activities you will use and make the necessary arrangements.
- Preview clips from the DVD: [Why I became a teacher](#) and [Christian Teachers Transform Lives](#)

Illustrations and activities

Some suggestions for illustrations and activities are given throughout the text. Choose a few that will suit your congregation.

1. Recap

Note: If you didn't use the first sermon you will need to adjust this introductory section to include the ideas outlined here as preparation for the rest of the sermon.

Last week we explored the nature of vocation. It's a word that we often link to being called to full-time Christian ministry or to the caring professions. But we saw that God gives each of us a primary vocation – to love and to serve God and our neighbour. When Jesus was asked 'what is the most important commandment?' he replied "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (Matthew 22:37-40) This is our primary calling.

Suggestions for illustrations and activities



But then each of us needs to discover the place where we should live out that primary vocation, our 'station' or specific vocation, whether that's as a parent, a teacher, an artist, a musician, a builder and so on.

2. Finding our specific vocation

Deciding how we serve and in what station in life is not always easy. First there are some things to avoid.

2a. Avoiding the guessing game. People talk of discovering God's plan for their life. Sometimes people think of this in an over rigid way, as if there is a hidden blueprint of their life in heaven and they must make the right decision in order to conform to this blueprint, otherwise all is lost. Think for a moment about the view of God this conjures up and the anxiety it creates. We need to remember that God is more interested in relationships than geography or career path. Being guided by God is a matter of living in a close and prayerful relationship with him and an awareness arising out of that. Nehemiah prayed for four months before he spoke to the king about what was on his heart. He spent that time drawing close to God. The word 'call' carries with it a sense of distance (like a telephone call). We need to close the distance.

2b. Not necessarily spectacular. If we wait for the flash of lightning or the vision to show us our vocation we might miss it. To think that all guidance is a spectacular miracle is similar to thinking that all falling in love must be at first sight. For Moses the call was miraculous, for Isaiah it came through a vision but for Nehemiah it came through an ordinary visit from his brother that awakened in him a strong desire to do something about the suffering he could see that his people back home were going through.

3. Steps to take

3a. Matching gifts, concerns and opportunities.

We all have certain gifts from God; these include the ones we were born with, the ability to do certain things. Nehemiah was a leader and an organiser. There are also things that matter to us, things our hearts burn for, as Jerusalem mattered to Nehemiah. Vocation is matching these gifts to the needs we see around us and the opportunities open to us. Nehemiah saw the need, had the gifts and did something about the opportunity – he asked the king. Some people have many gifts and they, like Albert Schweitzer who was a musician, theologian and doctor, could be all sorts of things. If that is true of

Before section 2a invite two people to the front. One person has a playing card that they shield with their hand; the other person has to guess what it is. Repeat the game at the end of section 2a but with the two people standing side by side so that the cards can be seen.

Show the clip from the DVD entitled 'Why I became a teacher' illustrating how Ben Slater and Oliver Smith decided to go into teaching. People will have seen part of this during the longer clip if you showed the clip last week.



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us, we will have to prayerfully discern which gifts we are being called to use at the moment as our calling sometimes changes, as Nehemiah's did.

3b. Don't worry if nothing is obvious. Some people do not have issues they burn for; their gifts do not point in an obvious direction and they do not feel a strong sense of calling. This does not mean we just stand still and wait. With prayer and talking to others, we can move forward tentatively. It is often in trying things out that we find what is right for us and what is not. It is often once we are in new situations that we discover gifts we did not know we had. Neither Jeremiah nor Moses were obvious choices for their vocations. We cannot know everything before we enter a situation. We need to be willing to learn about ourselves.

3c. Seeing how we can serve. We can make judgements on our role in a particular area based not on how much money we can make or how much power or status a position might give us, but on what service we can offer. Being Governor of Jerusalem sounds good but it was a rundown area devastated by war. Nehemiah gave up a good job to serve his country. That does not mean we shun power or status but with those comes responsibility. If we have power and status, we also the responsibility to transform situations where we can.

3d. Assessing our gifts. This should be done prayerfully with people we trust and who know us well. God usually equips us for what he calls us to do. For example, he is unlikely to call a person who has no sense of direction to be an air traffic controller. Discovering our vocation is about becoming all that God intended us to be.

3e. Interests, skills and knowledge. When deciding our vocation it sometimes helps to think through what we have already done. Where did I work well? What was it about that situation that made it satisfying? These things **may** help us in making a decision. Job satisfaction, although it is important, is, however, simply an indication; it is not the only factor. We also need to be aware that God may be calling us to do something different from what we have enjoyed in the past. Be open.

3f. The life cycle. Where we are in the life cycle affects what we do. God can call us to different things at different times in our lives. Nehemiah probably thought cupbearer to the King was a job for life. He was wrong.

Remind people about Dave Bennett in the DVD clip from last week, who went into teaching very unsure that it was the right thing for him. But when he got there, he discovered that it was. If you haven't used the first sermon, show the clip before the sermon.

Ask people to discuss in twos the gifts and qualities that are essential for a specific profession, for example teaching. Get feedback using a roving mike.



3g. Honesty. We need to reflect on our motives as sin still mars our lives. Is our decision affected by greed, a lust for power, status or laziness? That does not mean that money, power or status are of themselves wrong, but they are not the reason for choosing a vocation.

3h. What are the opportunities and challenges?

Our gifts are given to us for using for others; we have been given them for a purpose. We should ask ourselves how we could use our gifts in this job. What are the opportunities? What could we affirm as a Christian in this position? What difficulties might there be for a Christian? What challenges might we face as Christians? We need to think through these difficulties beforehand and discuss with others ways of coping. How could we transform things from this station in life?

Conclusion

- We live in a relationship with God. God gives us gifts, and a response is required of us.
- We live in the world – a broken, needy world. A world that needs what we have to give and a response is required of us.
- We live with ourselves, our passions and concerns, and a response is required of us.
- God calls, we respond.
- The world calls, we respond.
- Deep within us something calls, and we respond. That is our vocation.

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