

S.H.A.P.E week 5
Sermon prepared by The Revd. Darryl Cotton

Experience: Lessons from the past are things that last!

Exodus 4: 10 – 15	God promises to teach Moses and Aaron
Psalms 16	I bless the Lord who gives me counsel
Romans 8: 22 – 28	All things work together for good
John 14: 18 – 26	The Holy Spirit will be our teacher

May the Words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts, be acceptable to you, O Lord, our Strength and Redeemer. Amen

So finally after five weeks, we conclude this brief study on vocation. For the last four weeks we have emphasised, perhaps over-emphasised, that each and every single one of us has a vocation. I truly hope that you have got that message so far - Each of us is called by God for a purpose to help build up his family in the Church.

We have seen that God gives to each one of us Spiritual Gifts; and that because we are unique individuals, each one of us is passionate about different things. We have seen that God gives us natural abilities to help us to develop skills, and that even though we all have different personalities, that merely means that because we are unique and special individuals, God calls us all to different vocations.

Today, then we are going to focus on the ‘E’ of SHAPE which stands for experience.

1. Experience Counts!

Now as we have seen, God has shaped each of us to fit into the “jigsaw puzzle” of the Church. But often our first response to God’s calling is the same as that of Moses. In the story of Moses, the Jewish people were being oppressed by the Egyptians and so they cried out to God for liberation. God heard their prayers and set a plan in motion to free them from their captivity.

If you remember the story well, God chose Moses to be a central figure in his plan and so he called Moses – he gave Moses a vocation. And what was Moses immediate response to his vocation? – He began making

excuses. He was afraid Pharaoh wouldn't listen to him and that he was not a good enough speaker (Exodus 4:10).

In our Old Testament lesson, we heard Moses say to God, "O my Lord, I have never been a good speaker, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." You see, the problem was that nothing in Moses' past experience had prepared him for this task.

And so God responds to Moses, "Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak."

But despite God's promise Moses still protests his God-given vocation. Moses even resorts to begging God not to use him. Moses says, "O my Lord, please send someone else." But God won't accept no for an answer. Instead Exodus tells us that the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses and he said, "What of your brother Aaron the Levite? I know that he can speak fluently; ... You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and will teach you what you shall do."

And so it would appear that God is an expert at giving us on-the-job training!

So the first thing we learn today is that lack of experience does not mean you do not have a vocation. Experience then is not a prerequisite for a vocation. All that is required is faithfulness and obedience.

Surely when God chose Moses to be a leader of his people, God must have known that Moses had a stuttering problem. If God knows how many hairs are on his head, then God must have also known all of Moses' weaknesses too. But God still chose Moses. Maybe there was something in Moses' personality that God wanted; maybe there was a depth of character, of integrity that made Moses the ideal candidate for his vocation. Whatever the reason is, God required faithfulness and obedience, and not experience.

2. All Experience works for Good

The second thing we learn is that what little experience we do have God uses for the good. Paul makes a powerful statement of faith in Romans 8:28 – he says, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose”.

Now maybe you think that Paul never had any bad experiences! But Paul in his letter to the Corinthians lists his bad experiences: he tells them he was beaten, stoned, shipwrecked, in danger from rivers, bandits, his own people and Gentiles, danger in the city, in the wilderness, at sea, “danger from false brothers and sisters, in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked.” (2 Corinthians 11:25 – 27). And yet despite all these bad experiences, Paul could still conclude that all things work together for good?

3. Teaching by Experience

You see Paul knew that God has always used our experiences to teach us. As God said to Moses “I will teach you what you shall do,” and Jesus made a similar promise before his death. Jesus said to us, “The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you” (John 14:26). We know that Jesus transformed the disciples’ lives by being with them day and night, and using their everyday experiences as teaching material. The Holy Spirit does the same for us.

So when we say that the Holy Spirit will teach us all that we need to know to fulfil our vocation we do not necessarily mean that God does this by “magically” equipping us; what we mean is that God uses people, other Christians, to teach us. Just like Aaron taught Moses, and Jesus taught his disciples, so others will teach us.

[When God called me to the ordained ministry, I didn’t have the faintest clue about being a priest – I had to be taught how to be a priest. And likewise with any other ministry that God might be calling you to do. You might not know how to do your vocation, but part of the process of faithful obedience is being willing to learn – to be taught.] *(Note to preacher: You are welcome to use this example or to think up your own personal example of how you learnt to do the ministry you are involved in)*

4. The Spirit transforms our Experience

The next point is that God sometimes uses our negative experiences as a basis for our vocation. Sometimes we groan because of the bad experiences we are going through. But Paul wrote that even our groaning can be prayer! He said, “The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words” (Romans 8:26).

In other words, the Holy Spirit transforms our bad experiences to enable God to teach us. Paul explains it like this: he says “God comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When others are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us” (2 Corinthians 1:4).

So we need to be open to God helping us in our weakness. One of the things that is said at an ordination of priests is the charge by the Bishop to those to be ordained and in that charge the bishop says, “You will depend not on your own strength, but on the Holy Spirit of God and his grace given through word and sacrament.” And so it is with all vocations. We are weak and often unable initially to do that which God calls us to do. And so we need to rely heavily on the Spirit of God to teach us, equip us, train us to do his work.

Conclusion

To conclude then. When we respond to God’s call to live out our purpose in building up his Church, we may not necessarily have the experience we need to fulfil that vocation. But if we are open to allowing God to use what experience we do have, and are open to being taught by God’s Holy Spirit, how to minister, we will not be let down. As Jesus said, “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ... I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.”

So this concludes our teaching series on Vocation: What is your SHAPE? Where do you fit into the picture that makes up the Church’s ministry? What are your spiritual gifts?

What are you passionate about?
What is your skill set and abilities?
What type of personality are you?
What experiences have you had?

My prayer now is that each one of us would be faithful and obedient and live vocational lives.

Amen.