In our Anglican calendar, today is Vocation Sunday. Vocation, in church circles, is a word commonly associated with ordination. But it is a word that means so much more than just becoming a priest - it could be a calling to children’s and youth work, licensed lay ministry, or even people who feel called to the religious life – i.e., becoming a nun or a monk. But this word is also connected to roles outside the church - teaching, caring or medical professions; I know a lawyer who feels called to use their skills to help people. In the first meeting of our new PCC this week, we began by introducing ourselves and explaining why we volunteered for the PCC, and a common theme was feeling called to share our skills and experiences.

When we think of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, we imagine pictures of him walking serenely with sheep, surrounded by flowers and luscious grass. The reality was quite different. When Jesus was talking about being the Good Shepherd, He was talking about His vocation as the true king. This was a controversial thing to say, especially in the temple while the Feast Of The Dedication (or Hannukah) was being celebrated. This feast celebrates the temple’s rededication under Judas Maccabeus after winning the battle against the tyrant Antiochus Epiphanes who, along with other pagans, had been using the temple to worship their Gods.

Naturally, the cry that often appears in the gospels when Jesus does or says something controversial is that he is undoubtedly demon-possessed. But unlike other times this accusation is made, it is not Jesus who responds but some of the crowd – some of the sheep, who have heard Jesus and found themselves following Him, listening to Him calling them and responding. As Jesus says, ‘My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.’

But how do we today hear God’s voice? How do we follow him? Some people hear God’s voice very clearly. Then, something very dramatic happens, and it changes them forever. Paul experienced this on the road to Damascus – as we heard last week. It is not unusual to find that God speaks to us in a crisis in our lives.

However, the process is much more subtle and gentle for some people – a series of nudges, a pull in a particular direction, or a comment by a friend or stranger. Then, God calls you in a way that speaks to you at the right time. He knows the right way to call each of us – we need to be ready to respond, and you won’t regret it once you do.

A wise clergyman told me that when you’re living out your God-given reality, whether it is working for a church, working in banking or the care sector, or volunteering for a charity or the community you generally have an energy about it you as your passion shines through. As St Irenaeus said, ‘The glory of God is a human being fully alive.’

What are we passionate about, and what brings you alive?

However, we also need to be aware that sometimes things stop us from living out that calling. We become perhaps more like sheep than we would like to think, following what the rest of the flock are doing. It takes courage to step away from the crowd, but it sets us apart when we do. Amanda Owen, the Yorkshire shepherdess, tells the story of a mother sheep who gave birth to twins – one of the lambs was thriving, but the other lamb was not. So, they removed it from the mum to hand-rear it. Usually, the mum would just sort of shrug and accept it. But not this mum – she took her other lamb, walked the 5 miles down to the farmhouse and began knocking on the front door demanding her lamb back. They housed the family in the barn and returned her lamb. Amanda says that this sheep was one of the best mothers she ever saw, producing some of the healthiest lambs.

I wonder if the courage we need to be willing to stand apart is part of the ‘great ordeal’ we hear about in our Revelation reading? To be like the mother sheep, it is necessary for us to be different, to stand out from the flock.

In their faith journey, many of the apostles set us an example. For example, Peter, who features in our Acts reading, learnt through his very public mistakes and needed to be forgiven often. But God’s grace flows into healing and new life out of this imperfect discipleship (as all our discipleships are).

A word often used in ministry is ‘discernment’ – the gentle listening and asking for God’s grace to hear his voice and know his will. Very usually, this takes some stillness and quiet to listen to his voice. Sometimes it is helpful to use guided meditations – many of you can find them online and in apps. It can also be beneficial to look back at our own lives and ask God to help us see where he has been working within us. To see the people, places, and situations he has given us that have helped us become the person he has made us be. Occasionally you may spot times when we have been like sheep and followed the flock even though we know it was wrong. Looking back often takes us forward. Where next? If you feel that little tap on the shoulder from God, it is usually a natural response to want to run in the opposite direction. But God only has our best intentions at heart, and I can guarantee you that the wise clergyman was correct - when you’re following God’s call, you feel energised and passionate and like you’re having the best time. - Hannah