

# 5 A call to a vocation



“Vocation” simply means a calling. The problem is that the idea of a Christian vocation easily gets funnelled into discussion of ordination, religious orders, or licenced lay ministry. There’s even a “Religious Vocation Sunday” set down in our Lectionary for the third Sunday in

August. Who knew that? And why isn’t any vocation a “religious vocation”? Because vocation isn’t just about ordination and the various ordained ministries, just as “ministry” isn’t just about what happens in and around a church building, especially with the liturgical rosters. It’s much bigger than this and is more about the roles we take on in our work (paid or unpaid) and what we do with our lives. Steven Garber has this to say:

The word vocation is a rich one, having to address the wholeness of life, the range of relationships and responsibilities. Work, yes, but also families, and neighbors, and citizenship, locally and globally – all of this and more is seen as vocation, that to which I am called as a human being, living my life before the face of God. It is never the same word as occupation, just as calling is never the same word as career. Sometimes, by grace, the words and the realities they represent do overlap, even significantly; sometimes, in the incompleteness of life in a fallen world, there is not much overlap at all.

Steven Garber, *Visions of Vocation*

- ❖ ***What’s your reaction to this?***
- ❖ ***What do you see as differences between “calling” and “career”?***
- ❖ ***Have you experienced an overlap between these two in what you do or have done?***

This is about the valuing of all work, of the way in which the daily round can be full of holy significance and a way of living out our faith. Back around 420 CE, St Augustine saw work in a variety of secular occupations as something undertaken “for the claims of human society,” to benefit those around us. The work we do each day, using the gifts that God has given us, can be taken and transformed by that same God and used to bring closer the coming of the kingdom.

This idea of work as a vocation isn't just limited to what is sometimes referred to as "the caring professions" – it could be anything we feel drawn to do which has for us a larger, spiritual, significance. Steven Garber again:

It is true that whether our vocations are as butchers, bakers, or candlestick-makers – or people drawn into the worlds of business or law, agriculture or education, architecture or construction, journalism or international development, healthcare or the arts – in our own different ways we are responsible, for love's sake, for the way the world is and ought to be. We are called to be common grace for the common good.

❖ ***What might "called to be common grace for the common good" look like in practice?***

## **Vocation in the Bible – workplace stories**

The Bible gives us a series of episodes where people are called to specific "religious" roles, and we've looked at a number of them in this study series, such as the calls of various prophets. But we also see people acting in other occupations, with God speaking to and through them in their everyday working lives. This is an important reminder (if one is ever needed) that it's not only professional religious people whom God uses.

In the Old Testament (in the books of Genesis, Daniel, and Esther) we see Joseph, Daniel, and Mordecai taking on high administrative and political positions, acting as deputies to Pharaoh or to kings, and they did this in foreign environments where the Hebrews were a minority people. There is Nehemiah – who started out as cup bearer to king Artaxerxes of Persia – managing the rebuilding of the temple and the walls of Jerusalem when people returned there after the Exile. Some were called as judges (Deborah, Samson, Jephthah) or rulers, including Solomon, Josiah, and Esther ("For just such a time as this" Esther 4:14). David was called away from his sheep to become king of Israel, but countless others continued as shepherds, grew crops, tended vines and made wine – indeed the whole sacrificial system of the temple could not have functioned without them. The woman of valour in Proverbs 31 creates and sells various kinds of merchandise, alongside running a household.



## A biblical call story for a judge

**Judges 6:11-17, 22-24**

Now the angel of the Lord came and sat under the oak at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, as his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the wine press, to hide it from the Midianites. The angel of the Lord appeared to him and said to him, 'The Lord is with you, you mighty warrior.' Gideon answered him, 'But sir, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our ancestors recounted to us, saying, "Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?" But now the Lord has cast us off, and given us into the hand of Midian.' Then the Lord turned to him and said, 'Go in this might of yours and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian; I hereby commission you.' He responded, 'But sir, how can I deliver Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.' The Lord said to him, 'But I will be with you, and you shall strike down the Midianites, every one of them.' Then he said to him, 'If now I have found favour with you, then show me a sign that it is you who speak with me. ... Then Gideon perceived that it was the angel of the Lord; and Gideon said, 'Help me, Lord God! For I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face.' But the Lord said to him, 'Peace be to you; do not fear, you shall not die.' Then Gideon built an altar there to the Lord, and called it, The Lord is peace.



The book of Judges gives us a repeated pattern: for a while, Israel served God and all was well, until the people began to worship the gods of the surrounding Canaanite community and then were oppressed and enslaved. Then Israel cried out to God, and God raised up a judge, and Israel was delivered – only then the cycle would be repeated yet again. Gideon was one of these judges – which was a military as well as a judicial function.

It's really clear that Gideon was far from being a mighty warrior – in fact, he was quite timid. We met him threshing his wheat in the bottom of a wine press so he wouldn't get caught, and then he's asking for sign after sign, including the famous episode of putting out a fleece to see if it alone would get wet (Judges 6:36-40). But he was the one God called to destroy the pagan altar and lead his people in battle; ultimately Israel defeated their enemies and the land was at peace for the rest of Gideon's life. The story of Gideon is one of someone experiencing God's strength in the middle of their own weakness.

- ❖ *Gideon sensed God’s call but, conscious of his weaknesses, kept making excuses. When have you done something similar?*
- ❖ *How does it help to remember that many of the biblical figures we admire “did it scared” and acted in spite of their fears and concerns?*
- ❖ *When have you needed God’s help and strength to carry out a task or take on a role?*

### **Other biblical call stories featuring work**

Genesis 2:8-9,15

God putting the human one in the garden to till it and keep it. Gardening and landscaping: the first occupations mentioned in the Bible.

Exodus 1:1-11

Bezalel and Oholiab called to be artists and craftspeople.

In the New Testament we find other occupations. Lydia, in Acts 16, was a business-woman in Philippi, a dealer in purple cloth (an expensive commodity), and there’s no indication that she left her business when she came to faith and had a church meeting in her house; likewise the Philippian jailer in the same chapter presumably continued being a jailer.



And let’s not forget that for most of his life Jesus worked not as a rabbi but at a much more ordinary job: “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” (Mark 6:3) In the usual chronology, Jesus was in “full time ministry” for three years – but doing other work for far longer. And many of his parables come out of the working lives of people.

### **A text about work**

### **Matthew 13:44-50**

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind;

when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Here we have the buying and selling of a field, a merchant who trades in fine pearls, and fishers sorting their catch – all used creatively to get people thinking about what God’s reign is like.

❖ *What does the variety of occupations in the Bible say to us?*

❖ *How might your occupation be used in a parable?*

## **A Theology of Work**

Another part of the celebration, indeed the hallowing, of work in the Bible is that the images used of God are often occupational ones: shepherd, potter/craft worker, architect, weaver, gardener, artist. Work is part of God’s nature – and so is part of ours as well: we’re workers made in the image of a God who works. Indeed, God created humanity to work – and especially to work in partnership with God – and to balance that work with sabbath rest.

Writer Dorothy L Sayers said that work should be looked upon, not as “a necessary drudgery to be undergone for the purpose of making money,” but as a way of life in which the nature of humanity “should find its proper exercise and delight and so fulfil itself to the glory of God.”

Because of this, all work can be God’s work and has value and significance, no matter the status of the one working. Our calling is primarily to follow Christ, to live as God’s people. Our work is an expression of this, and we can look for ways of connecting our work with our calling to follow Christ. And “work” here need not be paid work – it can include looking after a family, or gardening: whatever occupies our days.

❖ *Does thinking of God as a worker – and us as workers made in the image of God – change your view of work?*

❖ *How do you find fulfilment “to the glory of God” in the work you do each day? Is the thought that it might relate to God’s glory a new one for you?*

❖ *How does your work connect with your calling to follow Christ?*

When we pray the Lord’s Prayer, we ask God to “give us this day our daily bread.” And God does – by means of the farmer who planted and harvested the grain, the baker who made the flour into bread, the person who prepared the meal, and also the agricultural scientists, truck drivers, factory workers, wholesale distributors, and supermarket check-out person – who all have a hand in it.



## Meet some workers



**Thomas More** (1478-1536) was a lawyer and scholar who served in a number of posts and lastly as Lord Chancellor (a high-ranking public servant) to Henry VIII. He opposed Henry’s separation from the Catholic Church, and the annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, and was eventually executed for treason. He was the author of *Utopia*, about an ideal island state.

**Susannah Wesley** (1669-1742) was a mother – of John and Charles Wesley, the founders of Methodism. She home-schooled her 10 surviving children (others had died in infancy) and believed in educating girls to the same standard as boys. When she couldn’t find textbooks for teaching her children, she wrote her own, and also led a Sunday school – initially for her own family and then for many neighbours. She kept a regular Bible study and time of prayer for over 50 years, praying, in the middle of a busy household, with her apron over her head to give herself some quiet and privacy.



**Francis S. Collins** (1950 – present) is an American scientist who invented positional cloning and took part in the discovery of the genes for cystic fibrosis, Huntington’s disease, and neurofibromatosis. He directed the National Human Genome Research Institute for 15 years, leading the Human Genome Project. In his youth he was an atheist, then agnostic, and then converted to Christianity. He has described the experience of sequencing the human genome as “both a stunning scientific achievement and an occasion of worship.”

**Allen Catherine Kagina** (1961-present) is a Ugandan administrator and corporate executive. Since 2015 she's been the executive director of the Uganda National Roads Authority (UNRA), and before that she served as the Commissioner General of the Uganda Revenue Authority – transforming that body from a corrupt institution to one which was open and well-run. She identifies as a born-again Christian and says about her busy life, “because I am born-again I lean on God, I pray and have a good prayer team; this helps me cope.”



❖ *Think of someone you know who sees their daily work as something they do for God, as a vocation: what makes them see it that way?*

❖ *Steven Garber sees vocation as “that to which I am called as a human being, living my life before the face of God” – so what is your vocation?*

## THOUGHTS / QUESTIONS

## Closing Worship

*You might like to close each session by praying together. Here are some possible prayers.*

God of the desert,  
as we follow Jesus into the unknown,  
may we recognise the tempter when he comes;  
let it be your bread we eat,  
your world we serve and you alone we worship.  
this we ask through Jesus Christ our Redeemer. Amen.

God, you are working still,  
breaking down and building up;  
open our eyes to discern your hands  
so that we may take our place  
as labourers together with you.  
Hear this prayer for your love's sake. Amen.

God,  
give us work till our life shall end,  
and life till our work is done. Amen.

**E tō mātou Matua i te rangi  
Kia tapu tōu Ingoa.  
Kia tae mai tōu rangatiratanga.  
Kia meatia tāu e pai ai  
ki runga ki te whenua,  
kia rite anō ki tō te rangi.  
Hōmai ki a mātou āiane  
he taro mā mātou mō tēnei rā.  
Murua ō mātou hara,  
Me mātou hoki e muru nei  
i ō te hunga e hara ana ki a mātou.  
Āua hoki mātou e kawea kia whakawaia;  
Engari whakaorangia mātou i te kino:  
Nōu hoki te rangatiratanga, te kaha, me te korōria,  
Āke ake ake. Āmine.**

