

TAKING THE PLUNGE

→ Standing on the edge of a completely new chapter or phase of life can be a very exciting place to be, but on the other hand it can also be quite terrifying and from where I'm standing at the moment, the view into the future and how it makes me feel changes from day to day. Perhaps that's how you feel too as you look ahead into your own future, or perhaps that's how we corporately feel as we look ahead to lots of change in the life of this church and Circuit. Change and challenge can be very welcome, but sometimes it all feels so big and so daunting that we'd really rather stay just as we are, thank you very much!!

.....Today as we begin to share in this journey that Jesus took to the cross, we have an opportunity to reflect on how Jesus may have felt when he arrived at a significant turning point in his life. He had been happily living an ordinary carpenter's life in the calm of Nazareth when he makes a leap into the unknown and sets off on a path and a life that would eventually lead to his death on the cross.

.....How did Jesus know when the right time had come for him to take that step? Notice that he didn't plunge right into ministry as soon as he became an adult but instead he lived quietly in Nazareth until he was 30 years of age. Should he have got on with his ministry sooner or were there things that he needed to learn by staying in Nazareth for those years? How do any of us know when it's right to wait, when it's right to get stuck in with something we've been invited to do or when it's right to try a different path through life altogether?

→ Unfortunately, discerning God's will is not an exact science! Those of us who really long to be sure that we're doing the right thing so often wish that God would actually send us a text message or write on the wall so that there was no doubt. But life isn't like that and perhaps what some of us need to grasp is that God's direction for our lives is actually much more fluid than we imagine!

.....You see, we are not a means to an end for God. It's not a case of him only being interested in where and how we end up, but he is also really interested in the journey we take to get there and the changes that take place in us as we journey. So, perhaps rather than asking what God's will is for us and sitting back and waiting until some bolt of lightning strikes us, we should be asking ourselves whether each day we are seeking to experience and prove God's will being worked out in us. That's a much more proactive way of looking at it and surely involves us in "just doing things" which I talked about a couple of weeks ago, rather than sitting back because we're not sure what we should be doing.

.....On Friday morning, Leslie and I were in Manchester for the Founders Day service of Laura's school. The person who gave the address, was as usual, an old girl of the school, who on this occasion happened to be the current Editor at Large or TIME magazine. Her overriding message to the current pupils of the school was this, "Never turn down a dare!" She expanded on that a little to make it clear that she wasn't really giving a message that some parents might find disturbing but that she was trying to emphasise the need for us all to never miss an opportunity to do things that take us way outside of our comfort zones, because it's only when we do that, that we will begin to discover our full potential.

.....How wonderfully I thought that fitted with all that we've been saying and hearing about the Holy Spirit in recent weeks. Sometimes we simply need to get on with it and often we discover that this thing or this role that we never thought we'd be able to do or fulfil is actually the thing that most fulfils us and makes us come alive. We just need to have faith to try it in the first place!

→ Right at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus sought out John the Baptist and chose to be baptised by him. Why on earth would he want to do that? Jesus wouldn't have had any sin to be forgiven so baptism was completely unnecessary in our normal understanding of what it's all about. And yet Jesus took this step even though there wasn't any obvious good reason for doing it! And then of course, as he did it, he heard that affirming voice of his Father and the Holy Spirit came upon him.

.....There's something really important for us to see and learn there I think and that is that often the things that we are invited to do don't always seem logical and may not always be to our liking. Remember that immediately after taking the step of baptism, Jesus was led into the wilderness. Just because something feels unnecessary or too painful or too difficult or too inconvenient isn't a sign that it's not where God is leading. Many of us perhaps need to remember that when we are invited to step up to the mark and get stuck in with some role in the life of this church or of other organisations of which we are a part. It's all too easy to say that it doesn't fit in with how we want life to be, when actually God may just be prompting us forward and encouraging us to make sacrifices, to live life differently and to experience a new affirmation and a new outpouring of his Spirit just as Jesus did at his baptism! But that affirmation and that outpouring only come after we've taken the step of faith. God's will often becomes most clear with hindsight!

.....God does care about the details of our lives but that does not mean that we have to consult him about every little detail because if we're walking with him and staying close to him, we will live with a sense of where we are meant to be heading. We are called to use the wisdom that grows in us as our relationship with God grows closer and deeper. The more we talk to and listen to him, the more we read his word, the more it becomes clear to us how we should live and what choices we should make. But if we're not making the effort to do these things and grow in our ability to discern then how can we expect God to lead us?

→ As we read God's word we know there are some instances where God calls in very dramatic ways and the people concerned are fairly clear about what is going on. But God doesn't often use burning bushes or pillars of cloud. More often he simply uses the circumstances and needs around us, the voices of our friends and the gentle prompt that comes as we read his word and pray. ***So how can we best help one another to discern God's call on our lives?***

..... This is a really important question I think because, quite often, when we are presented with a request or an invitation or a challenge, we deal with it ourselves. We pray about it and we may just mention it to our husband and wife, but we almost dare not mention it to anyone else for fear that they might say what we don't want to hear. I remember when I was first approached to become the Synod Secretary in the Sheffield District way back in 2001 that I decided to talk to a wise Circuit Steward about the matter, fairly convinced that she would tell me not to be so stupid and that it would eat into far too much of the time that I should be spending in Circuit. Guess what happened! I rang her and told her why I was ringing and she responded by saying she was glad I had called

because she had just been about to ring me to suggest that I should allow myself to be nominated for the post!

.....God speaks through others. The trouble is that we are sometimes more ready to listen to those who tell us not to do something than those who tell us we should. When the Leadership Team in this church approaches you about a role, they haven't just plucked your name out of thin air. They have spent time thinking and praying about it as individuals and as a group together. It's worth considering that God may just be speaking through them when an invitation comes your way!

→ God called Abraham to leave his town and go to a land that he would show him. God called Moses, who was afraid to speak in public, to deliver his people and he called a corrupt tax collector to be one of Jesus' disciples. None of those calls or situations probably make sense when we apply our human logic, but they do not contradict God's word and that's a really important factor! Why? Well, because when we are seeking to discern God's will for us there are a few things that are often evident when God is guiding us. The first is just that, that the guidance will not contradict his word. Secondly what we are being asked will often require sacrifice on our part and thirdly it will generally fit with the gifts and the personality that God has given us, but sadly some of us haven't always quite discovered what they are and that's why it's really important that we do our discernment in community so that we can help one another to make those discoveries.

.....There are many occasions in all of our individual lives and also in our life together as a church when we are called to respond to an invitation or an opportunity that presents itself and encourages us to see things or do things differently. We'll be confronted with just such a situation in our General Church Meeting in a short while. Sometimes it's not always easy to discern which way to go but if we stay close to God we can always walk by faith into the future, even when that territory is completely unknown in the confidence that "God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose." So, in that confidence we can always "take the plunge" as Jesus did at the start of his ministry, knowing that God goes with us and will continue to direct our paths because only he sees the bigger picture.