

Sermon 19 July 2009 Rev Nathalie Dürmüller  
Subject: Jonah 1,1-17, What is your vocation?

Dear Parishioners, dear friends of the Swiss Church

Last weekend I met a Chinese Minister, who works for a United Reformed Church in London. He told me that he had a calling from God to become a minister, but during 18 months he struggled with this calling, as he wasn't sure whether he wanted to become a minister or not. He first reacted like this, as he was quite afraid about the impact this would have on his life. So I asked him: "Was it a bit like Jonah, who didn't want to respond to God's calling to go to Nineveh?" The minister's eyes were shining brightly "Yes," he replied. I was quite impressed and also intrigued by what he meant when he was talking about his calling. Did he hear a voice? Or was it perhaps a word of the Scripture that spoke to him very directly or did he maybe even have a vision? Possibly it was just a deep feeling that he felt, something like a certainty that this was what he had to do. Unfortunately I didn't dare to ask him, what actually happened to him when he had his calling so we will never know, but certainly there must have been *something* that made him feel that he had a calling from God to study theology in order to eventually become a Minister.

In the Old Testament we find a variety of stories about very obvious callings from God. The tale about the prophet Jonah who is called to go to Nineveh, that we heard today in the reading of the Scripture, is just one of them. All prophets in the Bible experience some sort of vocation and most of the time they hear God's voice directly or they have some sort of dream that prepares them for God's mission that they have to fulfill. I don't know if anyone of you has ever experienced anything similar? I have to confess that to me it sometimes seems as if the people in the Old Testament were living in a completely different world. And I'm wondering why God is not talking to us in the same obvious way any more or at least only very rarely people experience this sort of vocation. For it is so difficult to understand what it means to have a vocation or a calling some tend to think that God is only calling people who end up working for the church. They think if they personally don't experience anything like a voice or a vision then at least the Ministers, Deacons and Parish Workers should have something to tell about their vocation. Today we have the great pleasure to get introduced to our new Youth and Parish Worker and some of you

might be wondering how it came that he left Stockholm in Sweden and that he decided to come to London to work for the Swiss Church. Was this maybe some sort of calling or was it for him simply changing of jobs? Well, we don't know, but you might get the chance to ask him this or other questions later at the reception.

Anyway from my point of view it is completely wrong to assume that only people who work for the church experience vocations. On the contrary I think that every single one of us has some sort of vocation in their life. But it is all about finding out, what this might be. Jonah's story about his experience is a good example for what it means to be called by God. If we are listening carefully to what he goes through until he gets to the point where he finally does what God called him to do can help us to find out more about our own personal vocation.

Jonah first hears "the word of the Lord" that tells him to go to the great city of Nineveh and to preach to the people there against their wickedness. But he *really* doesn't feel like it. Can you imagine that this is actually not the greatest calling to receive, great would be to hear: "Jonah, I want you to be a big pop star" But no, God didn't call him for that, instead he said something like: "Jonah, go and tell the people of Nineveh that they have to change their lifestyle and turn to me again." Would you feel like doing this? I definitely wouldn't! Whoever takes on this task must look like a terrible moralizer. Therefore I understand very well, why Jonah tries to flee from God and that he boards the boat to Tarshish, foolishly hoping that God would somehow not find him there. So this is already the first thing that we can learn about the character of a calling as they are described in the Old Testament: It is usually something that the person who is called doesn't really want to do but where he feels strongly that this would actually be the right thing to do. It is like a deep feeling inside of the person that tells her/him that this is the direction to go and that to run away from it would be wrong.

Do you know this kind of feeling? Can you think of something where you thought: "Well, I would rather do something else, but I feel that this is the right thing to do?" I'm sure that all of us know this kind of feeling. If you are able think about such a situation, could this have been some sort of calling?

As a vocation often is something that the person has not been dreaming of all their life there is usually first quite a bit of resistance against it in the beginning. I have to say that Jonah's reaction to God's calling is quite innovative: He first flees, then he falls asleep, then he jumps into the sea where he is finally caught inside the belly of this big whale. At this point it is literally impossible to flee. So the course of running away, doing other things, ignoring God, ignoring other people is also part of the process of accepting God's calling. This period can take very long, sometimes a lifetime and sometimes it is only a short time of resistance. I believe that this time is very important as it gives the person time to figure out whether the calling is really one that he/she can accept or not. Maybe this is also a time where we actually learn skills to get prepared for the duty afterwards. In the Bible story this is described as Jonah's time in the belly of the fish. In his desperate situation he sends a heartbreaking prayer towards God, asking him to help him out of the situation he is stuck in. Only now that he is desperate he is ready to turn back to God and to fulfill his calling. The darkness of the whale's belly is a symbol for a time of crisis and being thrown back at himself. When I say "crisis" then I mean the Greek meaning of the word, which is the word for the junction of two roads. Facing such a situation one has to decide which way to go. So Jonah is at the point of having to take a decision and this is when he feels strongly that it is time to return to God and to ask him for guidance.

When we try to think of times of crisis in our own lives than we might see that this was often a time when we had to decide which way we wanted to go. If everything goes according to plan we feel happy and at ease, only when there are unwanted changes then we might experience something similar to what Jonah was going through. When we are - symbolically spoken - trapped in the belly of a whale it seems like a terrible situation to be in. But from now on as we know more about Jonah's story we might sometimes remember that such situations can give us time to rethink our own vocation and to take the right decisions. In these times many turn to God again and they ask him for guidance and I think this is an important process if we want to find out about our own personal calling.

Of course some people also experience what I would call " a smooth vocation", which means that they simply accept their call and that they are ready to go for it. From the very beginning they

might experience great joy about it. Sometimes the calling just comes at the right time and people feel that this is what they really wanted to do. This is how the vocation of the first disciples is described in the New Testament. Simon, Andrew, James and John simply follow Jesus' call and leave everything behind. This is of course wonderful, but occasionally it might happen that people go through a time of crisis later when they have already taken up the duties of their calling.

I'm wondering whether all of you can think now of some sort of vocation that you have experienced in your life. When I think of the Swiss Church then I see that many people are doing a lot of volunteer work and whatever kind of volunteering work you do this is always a vocation, I believe. Why is volunteer work a vocation? Well, I'm quite certain that many of you have had times when you just wanted to give up on your church duties or when you felt like running away from it and hiding somewhere where nobody of the Swiss Church could find you. Is my assumption correct? And this is according to the story of Jonah a typical sign for a vocation, often we don't choose our vocation freely but we do it because we feel that this is the right direction to go. So being actively part of a church means often that you do something because of the bigger context of your work. It means being part of God's plan for his church. Therefore I hope that all of you will discover - if you haven't already - your own calling in the Swiss Church. So hopefully next time when you are not sure about your vocation, think of Jonah and remember how brave he was when he eventually went to the people of Nineveh even though in the beginning he didn't want to go there at all.

Amen