

Scripture: Isaiah 6: 1-8 / Luke 5: 1-11

Text: *Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us? And I said, 'here am I. Send me!'* (Isaiah 6: 1-8)

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT, AMEN

Margaret and I have been looking forward to this day very much indeed.

It was May 1988 that we moved into 50 Ardgowan Street and I was inducted as the minister of St Luke's, the newly formed union of the Old Kirk and St Mark's Greenbank.

Alex Cameron and Jim Gray were the joint Session Clerks, Norman Paterson was the Kirk's treasurer, Jack Fraser was Clerk to the Congregational Board, May McGeorge was the organist and Adam Pickett was the church officer.

Looking back to our five years in Greenock, if the building of the new hall was one of the highlights, so too was the evening when we hosted the London Community Gospel Choir and the rafters of this historic church building shook as never before.

Today the congregation has a different name, all the principal office-bearers are different, much of the town looks very different – and with three grandchildren now so do we.

However, it is a great pleasure to return to the 'tail of the bank' and to return as Moderator and it is my privilege to bring you the greetings, prayers and good wishes of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.

As you know, with its great vision of a church and school in every parish, the Scottish Reformation was always local in its outlook.

It remains so to this day and one of the great privileges of being Moderator is to see that the health and vitality of the church is to be found not in its Moderator or its General Assembly or even the local Presbytery, the courts, councils and committees of the church, but in the life and worship and activities of local congregations.

People have often asked if I always wanted to be a minister but when I was growing up in Kilmarnock what I wanted to be was a professional golfer.

Rather than wanting to be a minister, I felt called into ministry and that experience of God calling people to various forms of service is what I would like to speak about this morning.

From the Hebrew scripture we heard of the dramatic calling of the prophet Isaiah.

As the narrative unfolds the scene is one of royal majesty, a heavenly palace, as Isaiah is given a glimpse behind the scenes as God attends to the affairs of state.

Set in the year of King Uzziah's death, probably 736 BC, it proves to be a terrifying experience for Isaiah.

Confronted by the glory and majesty of the heavenly court, Isaiah is overwhelmed by a sense of his own unworthiness.

He is a man of unclean lips living among a people of unclean lips – and to make matters worse Isaiah has now seen God and will surely die.

Rather than death however, to Isaiah's surprise a seraph touches a coal to his lips cleansing them and removing his guilt.

And to his greater surprise Isaiah hears the voice of the Lord asking whom he should send.

Isaiah was already a man of faith but his spiritual journey was about to take him in a new and unexpected direction.

It was not a direction he sought, or one he thought he deserved, but I want you to notice God met Isaiah's confession with understanding and forgiveness.

In other words, Isaiah's calling came not because he was particularly good or powerful or holy or wise but was born of God's goodness and grace.

So with Isaiah, so with us all.

Whoever you are, are you here in church this morning because you have always served God faithfully and well?

Do you suppose for a moment I am the Moderator because I am a paragon of virtue?

Of course not - and while I don't want to suggest you are all miserable sinners with no redeeming qualities whatsoever.....although looking around the congregation I have to saylet me say that the spiritual journey of faith and life is itself a sign and gift of God's grace.

Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?

Looking back I realise the role other people played in awakening my sense of calling.

There were the Sunday School teachers here at what was the Henderson Church.

There was the captain of the 1st Kilmarnock Boys Brigade who asked me to read the Bible at the annual church parade and then to lead the Sunday morning Bible class.

There was a history teacher at Langside College in Glasgow who took me under his wing and, long after I had left school to pursue my dream of being a golfer, opened up the possibility of going to university.

And there was the late John Weir Cook, someone with deep family roots in this place, whose preaching on the grace of God was quite inspirational.

Rather than any thunderbolts from heaven, or even a moment of blinding conversion like Paul on the Damascus Road, my spiritual journey involved a gradual awakening of my faith, a growing sense of God's presence and purpose in my life.

And reflecting on that journey I have come to appreciate that critical to my calling was the role of other people, people who encouraged me, people who perhaps saw in me something I did not see in myself.

So let me ask if ministry is something you have ever considered?

Would you be interested in finding out more about the various ministries of the church?

Or is there someone you would encourage to think about ministry, someone in whom you recognise a potential which perhaps they don't recognise in themselves?

As he was attending to his nets that fateful morning on the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee, do you suppose Simon Peter had any thought of becoming a disciple?

The gospels tell us quite a lot about Simon Peter.

He was the one whose boat Jesus borrowed.

He was the one who fell on his knees when the boat filled with fish.

He was the one who protested loudly when Jesus first spoke about Jerusalem.

He was the one who offered to build shelters on the Mount of Transfiguration.

He was one of the ones who fell asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane.

He was the only one to follow when Jesus was arrested.

He was the one who denied knowing Jesus.

He was one of those who ran and saw an empty tomb that first Easter morning.

He was the one who recognised the stranger's voice when they went back home fishing.

He was the one Jesus told to feed his lambs and take care of his sheep.

He was the one who addressed the crowd on the day of Pentecost.

From a morning spent mending his nets, Simon Peter's journey was nothing short of remarkable - yet isn't it true to say every person's journey of faith is nothing short of remarkable.

Whether or not God gives us a new name, God gives each of us a new life, bringing to birth a new purpose and creating a fresh hope because then or now, the calling of God is never a calling to stand still, think the same, believe the same, live the same.

It is always a call to learn and grow and be led into new experiences of God's presence and promise in the world and our place within it.

*Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying,
'Whom shall I send?
And who will go for us?'*

Although I once dreamed of winning the Open Championship and wearing a green Masters jacket, not for a second would I wish my life back again, for my calling to ministry remains as strong now as it did then, and the work of ministry remains as varied and demanding as it is frustrating, challenging, enjoyable and rewarding.

And through the opportunity it gives me to share the hopes and promises of the Christian faith with people in some of the best and some of the worst times of life, it is a privilege beyond words.

It is of course but one part of the ministry in which we all share, the ministry of our Saviour Christ, who calls us to follow and in whom each one of us has the opportunity to respond;

Here am I Lord, send me!

Now unto him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end, Amen