

# Vocations Sunday 2025: Sermon

## Roll up the map and find your call!

Imagine a map of the world. Which country have you put in the centre? What are the proportions of each continent? You probably imagined something like a Mercator map, which was originally created for the purpose of navigation, and dates back all the way to 1569. But, useful as it is for that purpose, the UK isn't really in the centre of the world! And it distorts the proportions of different countries. For example, did you know that Australia is three and a half times larger than Greenland, but in fact appears much smaller on the Mercator map? Another version of the world map is the Gall-Peters Projection World Map. This is proportional, but of less use for navigation.

Author Susan Maros, in her book *Calling in Context*,<sup>1</sup> suggests that all of us have mental maps about what our calling should look like and, in the same way that you probably placed the UK in the centre of your mental map, you don't even realise it! Maros also points to us having a mental map of the 'typical' calling story in the Bible, which frequently has five stages: God as caller, whose task is to call, with the individual as the one who is called, and who then recognises that call, and the call is confirmed.

In a sense, our reading from Acts this Vocations Sunday does nothing to challenge that typical calling structure. Among Pauline scholars, there is controversy about whether Paul is converted or called. There's a lot that Pauline scholars have to say about this, and the New Perspective theology says that Paul was called rather than converted – he remains an adherent of the Jewish religion, for example.

In terms of a calling story, all five of Maros' elements are present: God is the caller ("I am Jesus"); God has the task of calling Saul and does so with flashing lights; Saul is the one who is called ("Now get up and go into the city and you will be told what to do"); Saul recognises that call and responds, going to Damascus; then, after three days, the call is confirmed as the scales fall from Saul's eyes and he is baptized. All five elements are present. It's all very neat and tidy, with no false starts or deviations or wrong turnings. It all happens in three days. Saul becomes Paul and devotes his whole life to creating the Church.

This 'traditional' type of calling story can reinforce in us a mental map that we *should* be called in some sort of typical way. Luke, the writer of the book of Acts, of course wants to emphasise that God's calling of Saul is an important moment: the story is repeated three times in Acts (Paul twice recounts the story later in chapter 22:3-16 and again in chapter 26:4-23). But do you find today's story easy to relate to? Are you expecting to walk down your high street and hear a thunderous noise, be blinded by a flashlight, for God to appear out of this and tell you to turn around and commit your life to Jesus? Probably not. Well, don't worry. It has been argued that this story appears three times precisely because it's so extraordinary and not a normal experience.

Susan Maros says: "What people tend to assume is that God's purposes are somewhere 'out there' in danger of being missed. Our anxiety about missing God's purposes suggest that we think God has deliberately made discerning those purposes difficult as some sort of test... in this context, we treat discernment like an examination: we must choose rightly or fail."<sup>2</sup> It's easy to get distracted by Saul's conversion and wait for God to call us to something special in this way. And wait. And wait. And wait – and keep on waiting. Or it's really easy to think that God's call is somewhere special: we will find it in a church or a formal act of worship. Or on a retreat. Or that we will be called to a certain place. For most people, God's call is not like that. In fact, God is already living and is at work, in you and in me in this place, and at this time.

So... let's roll up our mental maps. And let's give ourselves some time to tune into God. Where do we *notice* God at work?

Is God speaking through other people? That's where the Samaritans and the Ethiopian find God in the story that comes before Saul's conversion or call. They notice God speaking to them through Philip.

It might be that you notice God in the world around you – it might be in the beauty of nature, the signs of spring, or the vibrancy and buzz of city life.

It might be in daily quiet time, or prayer, or Scripture, or the smell of coffee, or in music or film or books.

The main thing is to consciously take time to notice. To be present to what God is saying to you.

God *is* saying something to you.

A wonderful later-in-life woman once described herself at church by saying: "Well," she said, "I just keep a seat warm." It wasn't false humility. She genuinely believed it.

Yet here she was: grace-filled, a great encourager of young people, embodiment of genuine connectedness with God, a model of compassion, of quiet,

undemonstrative, fierce justice. She had been a primary school headteacher for 20 years, a trailblazer at the time when it was unusual for women with families to work, let alone work full-time in a demanding position. She lived out her God-given gifts within the life of the Church and outside it at all ages and stages of her life.

This belief that we aren't enough for a job is known as imposter syndrome. Can you think of your own story and a time when you had imposter syndrome? Perhaps we could take an opportunity to discuss this with the people sitting around you...

But God says, "Don't have imposter syndrome. Roll up the maps!"

Teachers among you will know that one of the things that students like to do when they leave school is to create a yearbook. This almost always has a page showing pictures of their classmates captioned: "Most likely to..." and you can fill in the gaps! Categories and nominations often include:

- be Prime Minister
- be a millionaire by the age of 21
- climb Mount Everest

What you don't often see is a page with "Least likely to be..." However, this is quite a fun game to play with the Bible: the "least likely to be called by God" game. It will show you that God definitely has a sense of humour, because God calls all of the unlikely people:

- Sarah and Abraham, the parents in their nineties!
- Esther, a woman, to challenge the king at great risk to her life and change a royal edict, at a time when that would have been almost unthinkable.
- Disciples, drawn from all walks of society, not just the great and good.
- A group of ordinary women in the chill and uncertainty of pain-filled morning, first to be entrusted with the Resurrection, the single most significant act in history.

Each one of us – no matter how unlikely – is given unique and wonderful gifts to live out that others might know God's love.

We know about Paul – but there's also the grumpy Damascene disciple, Ananias who doesn't want to help Paul. Not unreasonably, Ananias distrusts Paul very deeply. And yet he does, essentially, ordain Paul to his role as the one who is going to take the good news to the disciples. I wonder what you feel his gift is. God knows!

In our Gospel reading too, Peter is called by Jesus to “feed my lambs”, to show others God’s love, three times. Clearly, this echoes Peter’s three denials of Jesus before his crucifixion. Once again, in a competition for “least likely to be called”, Peter would rank quite highly. But look at the nature of the encounter.

The theologian Tom Wright states: “The brief conversation between Jesus and Peter in John 21 is one of the most moving encounters ever recorded. There is a love, a deep moving warmth that goes out from Jesus. But this love is strong, powerful, life-changing, life-directing. New creation has begun, and its motivating power is love.”<sup>3</sup>

So... roll up those maps!

God doesn’t call you and me just to make up the numbers. God’s not like the captain of the school football team saying, “The gifted striker wasn’t available, so we’ll just have to make do with you!” No. Theologian Joseph Bessler, draws attention to the fact that “we need multiple gifts, perspectives and theologies in both the local and wider church that need to be honoured in order for our personal and corporate faith to be whole”.<sup>4</sup>

It’s interesting that there’s a sense of possible division amongst the disciples: the Peter camp versus the Beloved Disciple camp. But Jesus has no truck at all with that: it is the contemplative Beloved Disciple who first recognises Jesus; it is Peter, the man of action, who jumps into the sea to gather the nets with the fish and draw in the big catch. We need them both.

We started this message with some maps. Maps that reminded us of the ways that are absolutely ingrained in us, that distort how we see ourselves:

- We often think that we have to wait for a loud clear Saul/Paul-like signal from God: the loudhailer calling. And yet – notice God at work. A feeling. Or in another person. Or in the sound of nature, or in the sound of the city. God will be saying something to you.
- We often think that we must drop everything to follow God’s call – but God is calling you at this time and in this place.
- We often think it couldn’t be me – I’m not good enough, or too busy, or too young, or too old, or too boring or too... but God calls all, not out of pity. God loves the gifts created in you. And God knows the world’s deep need of them.

And so roll up the maps and hear God, who is ever at work in your life and in the world, calling you to find where your deep gladness meets the world’s deepest need<sup>5</sup> so the love of God made known in Jesus, might be made known in and by you.

So, on this Vocations Sunday, I would like you to reflect:

- Do you have imposter syndrome?
- Who is different from you in your church? Why do you need their gifts and call? How could you better enable their call right now in this time and place?

It is easy to claim that God doesn't call us – or that God might call us at another time, but definitely isn't calling us now. We've already talked about Paul's past. None of us is too bad, or too busy, or too young or too old, or too (fill in the gap!) to be called. God's call is to each one of us, for "this person, in this time, in this place",<sup>6</sup> as author Gordon Smith reminds us.

You will all be at different stages in your life: young, working, retired; excited, fulfilled, disillusioned; very busy, enjoyably busy, with too much time; in good health or in poor health; with lots of money or not enough. You will all live in different places: some rural, some urban, some in-between, with different joys and different challenges. And yet you are called: each one of you in this time of your life for the location in which God has placed you. So, let's take time to reflect on and discuss these questions:

- What is the need in the place you are? Is there a need in church or in your community?
- How can your gifts and calling be best used at this time of your life, for this place?
- And where do your God-given gifts meet your community's deepest needs?

In discerning these questions, we're rolling up the maps that cage us – and authentically being who we are made to be in the messiness, pain, joy and hope of the place where we live. **Amen.**

## References

1. Susan Maros, *Calling in Context: Social location and vocational formation* (2022) IVP: Illinois
2. Susan Maros, *Calling in Context*, p.183
3. Tom Wright, *Simply Jesus: Who He Was, What He Did, Why It Matters* (2011) SPCK: London
4. Joseph Bessler, 'John 20:1-19: Theological Perspective' in David Bartlett and Barbara Taylor Brown (ed.) *Feasting on the Word: Year C Volume 2* (2009), Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, Kentucky, p. 420-425
5. This definition of vocation was originally coined by the American theologian Frederick Beuchner's book *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC* (1973) Bravo: Colorado
6. Gordon Smith, *Your Calling Here and Now: Making Sense of Vocation* (2022), IVP: Illinois, p.1

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