

*Bishop Ross preached at the Diocesan Confirmation Service in Holy Trinity Cathedral on Sunday evening 15<sup>th</sup> August 2010. The readings were 1 Samuel 3:1-10; Ephesians 6:10-20; Luke 24:13-35. Candidates came from the Cathedral District, Hibiscus Coast, Mercury Bay, St Paul Symond's St, and Milford.*

It is good to welcome you here from various places as we gather to celebrate these confirmations tonight. The Cathedral is something of a turangawaewae for us as a diocese. It is a place to stand together, a place where we all belong. So welcome especially to those who come to be confirmed and thus to profess your faith in Christ and your commitment to serving Christ within an Anglican expression of Christian faith.

There are two things I want to say tonight.

- The importance of our own personal encounter with Christ
- From that, the call of God on us to serve

It is a message of course to those who come to be confirmed tonight, but in fact a message for us all.

I have been reflecting again recently on my own experience of coming to faith. In part that has been because over these first few months as bishop I have been going to a lot of new places and so telling my own story as I get to know people. And my reflection of late is this:

I met Jesus, long before anyone made a formal introduction.

Let me explain. It was the ministry of our parish youth group that helped me to form a conscious faith of my own. Going tramping with some people from that youth group, then later on being asked to join in their other activities, offered me a friendship that had a greater level of authenticity than I had ever been shown before. It was marked out by simple but genuine acceptance and care.

After a while someone asked me if I wanted to talk about what I thought about Jesus. I didn't really know in the sense of making faith statements, but what I did know was that if it was Jesus who held the key to the kind of life I had found in that community, then I wanted to know more about what it meant to have faith in him.

So encounter came before profession.

I wasn't talked into faith – I was shown faith.

I met Jesus before anyone made the formal introduction.

The gospel passage tonight is helpful in thinking about that. Cleopas and his companion do not realise they are travelling with Jesus, but they are drawn to him and happy to have this extra company on their way and they feel confident as they tell him all about what they have been experiencing and urge him to stay with them for the night. There is a sense of them having met someone whose company they do not want to lose.

Then through Word and Sacrament, Christ opening the Scriptures and breaking the bread, they realise who it is that is with them. And they go straight away, in spite of all the dangers of travelling at night, and tell others.

It is their sense of encounter that has taken hold of them and energised them ("did not our hearts burn within us?") Their profession of faith follows.

I suspect that will be true for each of you. The experiences will be different in all sorts of ways, but it is the sense of encounter that brings you here tonight to profess your faith in Christ and to receive the laying on of hands to strengthen you for the service of Christ.

Which brings us to call. There is no encounter without call. Vocation does not belong to a few within the Church. Christ calls all of us to exercise the gifts of ministry that we have been given and those confirmed tonight make some particular promises about what that means.

- A commitment to the corporate worship life of the Church
- A faith marked out by forgiveness and love, peace and justice
- Allowing that faith to pervade every part of life, and so being an agent for making known the good news of Christ

That represents a general call to Christian faith. Those are the marks of what it is to live as a Christian person and participate in the ministry and mission of the Church. But to each of you I believe that God will be making a more particular call to ministry. And your task becomes one of discerning what that will mean for you. What is the particular role that Christ calls me to play within the life of the Church? How is Christ calling me to act in a missional way to others beyond the life of the Church?

That discerning task is not always easy. But we do not do it on our own. We may sense the call of God in a particular way, but the integrity of the call is worked out within the wider body of believers. If God is calling, others will identify that call also.

We have of a particular call in the Scriptures tonight about the call of Samuel. But notice how Eli helped the younger Samuel to discern God's call. And if you read the whole chapter, you will find that Eli not only helps Samuel to discern God's voice, but also then listens to the content of the call and affirms it in Samuel, even though it is a message of judgement against Eli himself.

So there is this pattern of God calling individuals and affirming call through the wider community of God's people. That is so important in us having confidence that the call we hear is from God and not of ourselves. Eli teaches Samuel to say "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening", thus expressing an openness to do God's will. But it is very easy to fool ourselves that our own will in a matter is God's call to us, and to effectively say "Listen Lord, for your servant is speaking".

Our ability to discern God's call can so easily be obstructed by cultural expectations, self-interest, self-absorption, or self-doubt. As we move from self-will to God's will, we put our lives into the hands of God and we find that God has work for us to do.

One sure measure of that is that the work of God will always involve the service of others, contributing to the good of the Body of Christ and of the wider community. Along with so many of the saints, Mary the Mother of Jesus whose life we remember in the calendar today, exemplifies this attitude of openness to encounter and response by obedience and service.

Encounter, Jesus Christ brings you here tonight. Call follows, and we pray that you may indeed know the strengthening power of God especially to fulfil that call as I lay my hands upon you in faith.