



what are mortals that you are mindful of them?

It won't surprise you, given the extract from Luke's Gospel we have just heard, that a suggested theme for today is that of being called and of responding.

Jesus calls Simon the Fisherman. He responds. The result is spectacular, even frightening, since so many fish were caught that the nets were beginning to break and soon the boats were so full of fish that "they began to sink".

Call and response is a foundational pattern in Christian praxis and narrative. *God calls. We respond.* All the other stuff is merely elaboration.

That sounds reassuringly straightforward, but reality intervenes. The call may be indistinct or distorted, much like the once-dominant use of the AM frequency that made listening to the radio a haphazard business, before FM, DAB and internet radio. And our response (sticking with the radio analogy for a moment) might be attenuated: reduced by our own circuitry and history.

What if the call is *misheard*? The scene in the 1979 film *Life of Brian* where a crowd is listening to Jesus still makes me chuckle. It plays upon what we call the Sermon on the Mount. The account in Matthew includes the line '*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God*' (Matt 5:9).

In the *Life of Brian* the size of the crowd and open-air acoustics are used satirically and Brian and his Mum are having trouble hearing. *What did he say?* She asks. '*I think it was blessed are the cheesemakers*' says a voice. '*And what's so special about the*

cheesemakers?' another demands. And some other bystander chides her '*Well, obviously, this is not meant to be taken literally. It refers to any manufacturers of dairy products*'.

Hearing and deciphering God's call is not straightforward. How else can we begin to explain the views and actions of some Christians, except by supposing that they, too, misheard God's call? We might even make it a maxim to be wary of those who claim certainty in knowing what God seeks of us or thinks about x, y or z.

We can't ignore the desire for clarity and certainty, imagined and real, that plays out in our human circuitry. Most of us want it; we seek it; we strike deals or make pacts to find it, even (and often) of the illusory variety. Instinctively we are ill at ease with too much uncertainty.

We're not to blame for that, or be punished for it (though we often end up punishing ourselves by misguidedly seeking it). Being alive is a risky and uncertain business.

God calls. We respond. In the light of what I have raised, how might we go about responding, sometimes to a call we sense but cannot fully decipher? I'd like to think through some options and see if they resonate with your experience.

I say *options* but really there are just two. And they may sound cheesy, or of the *Songs of Praise* variety, where everyone seems happy and smiles a lot. But suspend judgement. I hope that in explaining each,

the value of these responses to God's call might be seen to be worth trying.

The first is *gratitude*, and the practice of gratitude; the business of nurturing a thankful heart. This isn't of the clichéd *count your blessings* variety, though I suppose it shares the same root. There is a line of contemplation which for me quickly takes me to a thankful place. It goes something like this.

Consider that we occupy a perfect planet, with an atmosphere that is exactly right for us; it has water; the temperature permits life; none of our known planetary neighbours have anything like so welcoming a set of conditions.

Our good fortune arises in part because we are exactly the right distance from the Sun. Our home is shadowed by a Moon, and without it we might not be here. With the Sun, its gravitational pull creates tides and one view is that life originated in tidal regions.

The list of improbable and startling conditions goes on. The earth orbits the Sun, tilting and swivelling as it goes, travelling a breathless 100 miles in the few seconds it takes to say that. The tilt and the rotation allows the Sun to rise on half the globe when setting on the other. If this did not happen, we'd be unlikely to be here. Add to these things the fact of constant gravity; the protective magnetic field that keeps cosmic radiation and solar storms at bay, and the sometimes inconvenient but actually stunningly marvellous weather systems that enfold the Earth.

All these highly-unlikely possibilities created life and have contributed to your being alive, and here, now. And that is before we have factored in the miracle of our good fortune to be born at all. That begins with the chances of your parents having met, meeting for a second date, and staying together long

enough to have you. Apparently, for you to get to that stage, the odds are 1 in 40 million.

Then contemplate that your mother produced about 100,000 eggs in her lifetime; your father, about 4 trillion sperm. Suddenly, the odds of your being that one egg meeting that one sperm and producing you (and not a brother or sister) reach 1 in 400 quadrillion.

You will see the purpose of this thinking. The chances of you being you are unbelievably slim. Unless at this moment you are in despair, these meditations might...should...enable you to foster a sense of gratitude. Maybe that's putting it mildly: there are moments when contemplating these facts that I weep with a sense of thankfulness, not just for *my* having been born at all, but that you have been, too.

We are advertising just now for an Apprentice Receptionist at St James's, and the recruitment is being part-managed by Westminster-Kingsway College. On their website, in the details about the job, there is a beautiful typo. It says that one of the duties is "To be alert to security and to inform a staff member where it seems that there is an unauthorised person wondering around...". It meant to say *wandering* around. *Wondering* around is, I reckon, a brilliant synonym for prayer. Wonder and gratitude are first cousins. Be sure to 'wonder around': here, at work, at home.

God calls. We respond. Think on this life. On your life. Foster a grateful disposition. Consider the odds against any of it happening. It is all simply breath-taking.

The second option (or way) for responding to God's call, after gratitude, is love. Let's immediately give the heave-ho to all the clichéd, often threadbare, trivial, even fraudulent and evasive uses of that term. Love is an orientation, a disposition, a way of understanding things and people, and a way of behaving.

It is something that proceeds *from* us, *towards* others; not something to be snatched or stockpiled like commodities ahead of a hard Brexit.

This morning the first reading came from Paul's letter to the Corinthians. A couple of chapters earlier he offers a pithy, electric explanation of love you might know: *Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

Integrating love into our lives and acting in that spirit in all things is not straightforward. That may be affected by wounds, by hurts and harms we have received at crucial stages. But those things do not mean we can't love; and sometimes those who have known security and love turn out not to be very able to love. None of this is linear. And very often it is those who have known deprivation or suffering of some kind or another who become, by some alchemy of grace and resolve, able to love the most.

Factor that into our earlier calculations of improbability and ask your heart what it makes of these things.

In the parable involving Simon, his co-workers, the boats and the fish, an interesting line is that the haul of fish is so astonishingly extravagant that the nets were beginning to break and the boats began to sink.

Was this, I wonder, simply to add impact to the parable? Or does it intend to convey a truth, a possible consequence of responding to God's call? To be deeply thankful for others, this planet and the amazing improbability of this heady adventure of life will inevitably give us a sense of responsibility towards these things. And at times that sense of responsibility and wonder may seem to overwhelm us. And, as we all know, love always carries the possibility of suffering and loss. Such is its nature and cost. And sink, we may, wondering whether we shall ever surface again.

'Then Jesus said to Simon, 'Do not be afraid'.... [and] When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him. [Luke 5:10-11]

Luke 5.1-11 Jesus Calls the First Disciples: "Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, 'Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.' Simon answered, 'Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.' When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signalled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!' For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, 'Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.' When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him." *See Revised Standard Version (Anglicised Edition)*