

VACATE TO VOCATE

– THE VOCATION OF ITINERANCY

Darren Middleton

ARMY CHAPLAIN, DARREN MIDDLETON, ARGUES THAT ITINERANCY IS ALSO A MATTER OF HEART AND SUGGESTS THAT WE NEED TO 'VACATE' SELF, BEFORE WE CAN TRULY FOLLOW JESUS.

For the past six years, I have had the enormous privilege to be a Chaplain in the British Army. The call to this ministry was unexpected, especially given that in a former life I was a professional dancer – it was not the obvious career move! Despite many doubts and misgivings, I knew God's call. I knew how God, in the past, communicated with me. This 'pull' or 'restless desire' was the indication that God was preparing me for a move. This was very much a call to something that was other than where I was; I knew the destination / where God was leading. This is very important because now – six years on – I feel the

call out, however, this time, the call is very much from something known, to the unknown...

The following is a reflection piece on 'vocation' in the context of itinerancy and how I am currently experiencing this in the move back to Circuit Ministry. I hope to communicate something of the uncertainty of what it means to travel with God in our everyday discipleship. But first!

I HAVE DECIDED TO FOLLOW JESUS – NO TURNING BACK!

As a Methodist Minister, itinerancy is central to our call to ministry, word and sacrament. At its root, itinerancy simply means 'to journey'. All of us, when called by Jesus 'to follow,' commit to the journey in some way, shape or form; so, in some sense this reflection holds something for all of us.

I find the words in Matthew's Gospel hard-hitting, when the would-be

disciple expresses his desire to follow Jesus and Jesus replies with the warning that he must put following him above all other things – even burying his father! Paralleled by the words of Jesus found in Luke's Gospel, 'If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters – yes, even life itself – such a person cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.' (Luke 14:26).

When we add to the mix, not even setting one's hand to the plough without considering the cost, it seems to me, that to journey with Jesus means prioritising that decision to follow – every day and in every circumstance and challenge that we face – no turning back, only pressing forward. This is not always easy – hence the cross!

PREPARE TO MOVE – MOVE

In January 2017, I joined 29 Commando Regiment Royal Artillery as their Padre.

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One of the qualifying criteria to this position was the willingness to 'attempt' the All Arms Commando Course at Lympstone. This was a big shout given that I was forty-four years of age and the average age of those on this course is twenty-five! People thought I was crazy but I had that quiet peace of knowing that God was in this and for some unknown reason was leading me through it.

During the course, we executed 'fire manoeuvre' drills which take place when a soldier is under contact from the enemy. It is the way in which the soldier engages and suppresses the enemy and closes in; suffice to say, I was engaged in this drill without a weapon. Lying on my belt-buckle in a constant state of watchful readiness, keeping my eyes on my partner as he moved forward under fire, waiting for the instruction, 'prepare to move – move', at which I would take my first life-saver step and run like 'billy-o' towards the enemy and oncoming fire!

Ministry / discipleship can often be like this – a constant uncertainty; a charged readiness to move whenever and wherever the Spirit directs. When people have asked me why I am considering moving out of Army Chaplaincy, my answer is very much, 'the cloud is moving on' (Numbers 9:15-23).

I have reflected much on this passage of scripture, what this demanded from the people of Israel and what the cloud symbolises and says about who God is. It is clear to me that the cloud is a symbol of God's presence with and the gracious

acceptance of the children of Israel. The cloud directed and determined all their movements and encampments. It didn't matter how comfortable the people had become, neither did it consider their liking of their surroundings. Whenever it moved, day or night, the people moved with it!

Obedience is never a comfortable thing. However, the Lord delights in it more than all other things. The personal challenge for me is to lay down a ministry that is effective and has impacted the Regiments and deployments on which I have served (I say this in all awareness of my dependence and need of Christ). Without doubt, it is a painful thing, being led to move out of somewhere that you love, not knowing where or what you are going to.

I find comfort in Exodus: 'Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people' (Exodus 13:22). God is faithful! As I write, I feel the fire of God's Spirit burn within me and a steady resolve fills me. God is faithful! God is faithful, GOD IS FAITHFUL! He can be no other.

The cloud not only symbolises his presence, but his acceptance of us, his protection, his power and his glory! The confidence of knowing that God is with us should be the very thing that propels us to move forward with holy boldness. The tragedy is when we refuse to move, or when our roots are too set and deep to be able to move. Sadly, not walking in step with God's Spirit, may mean that God moves on without us...

The journey of itinerancy... requires us, at times, to vacate – to leave those things that we hold dear and those things that are precious to us: friends, communities, the familiar, the recognisable, the secure...

VACATE IN ORDER TO VOCATE

Recently, our neighbour had his 'march-out'. This is when a service family moves out of their Military Quarters. Vacant is not the word! It is completely swept out as if no one had ever occupied that place at all! Our neighbour is also a Military Padre, Navy – not that I hold that against him! He is going to be Padre of a Commando Regiment; a new assignment; new challenges; a new direction. It suddenly struck me that in order for him to 'journey on' with his vocation, he first had to vacate his current location – vacate in order to vocate!

The journey of itinerancy (which, I have argued, we are all called to as we respond to Jesus's call to follow) requires us, at times, to vacate – to leave



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those things that we hold dear and those things that are precious to us: friends, communities, the familiar, the recognisable, the secure...

'The LORD had said to Abram, 'Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you...'

Genesis 12:1

There is nothing secure about itinerancy and journeying with Jesus and yet there is everything secure about itinerancy and journeying with Jesus. Reading commentary on this passage of scripture, the commentator suggests that Abram needs to 'begin a pilgrimage with God to a better world of God's making' (TNIV Study Bible, 2006: Zondervan, 25). The flip side of this is to stay settled and refuse to journey on, thereby, turning away from the vocation of itinerancy – the call to follow – taking the hand off the plough.

I am struck by the concluding verses to the previous chapter, when we find Abram's father leaving Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan: '... but when they (Terah, Abram, Lot and family) came to Harran, they settled there' (Genesis 11: 31). I cannot read that passage without wondering whether the call to go to Canaan came to Terah first, but because he 'settled' in Harran and cuts short the journey, God's call came to Abram? If this is the case, and the scripture does not tell us, there is a vital lesson to be learned in the call to itinerancy.

So, itinerancy is at the heart of what it means to follow Jesus – the priority of the call to journey with him. However,

itinerancy does not just mean that we move geographically. It may, at times, mean exactly that, but there is a journey that transcends even the vacation of physical abode – the vacation of self! I want to argue that the journey or the true vocation to itinerancy is the call to vacate self, ego, our wants and agendas, in order to journey to the place of God's making, as outlined earlier. It is easy to become so settled with where we are and who we are in God and with God, that we are more than happy to 'settle' and cut short our journey with him and in him. The danger is that we may not reach the place of promise and realise all that God has called us to be. Terah compromised, Abram mobilised – continuing on the journey that his father began and became the father himself of all who, through faith, mobilise on this journey.

ITINERANCY OF HEART

In Jesus we see a perfect example of someone who totally prioritises the will of his Father, ultimately culminating in his willingness and charged readiness to move, uncompromisingly, towards Jerusalem and the fulfilment of the cross – where we hear the victory cry: 'it is finished!' The place of Gethsemane is the battleground where his wrestle with self and his preference to have the cup taken from him, is powerfully overtaken by his resolve to complete his journey and embrace the cross. Charles Wesley captures this in his hymn, 'And Can it Be': 'Emptied himself of all but love, and bled for Adams helpless race.' This is the optimal expression of vacation of self in order to vocate himself completely to the fulfilment of his journey.

The risk for all of us is that we settle – whether this means geographically or spiritually. Our priority should always be to complete the journey that we dedicated ourselves to when we decided to follow Jesus. That decision continues to challenge each and every one of us to the true vocation of itinerancy of heart and a journey that ultimately leads us into the 'heartland' of God.

God never stands still and there are always new places for us to go, both inwardly and outwardly. So, as a military Chaplain, journeying into the unknowns of the stationing process and Circuit Ministry, I will wait on my belt-buckle with charged readiness for the words of the Holy Spirit: 'Prepare to move – MOVE!'

Formerly a professional ballet dancer, the Revd (Major) Darren Middleton is Chaplain to 29 Commando Regiment, based at the Royal Citadel in Plymouth. He returns to Circuit Ministry in September 2019 – destination: currently unknown!



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