**A willingness to respond to God’s call**

Jeremiah 1:1-10 - 1 Timothy 1:1-2 + 4:9-16. – Mary Slessor

For some it’s hard to imagine thatGod really does call each and every one of us individually, and even harder to imagine that on top of this he also equips us for the very purpose of that call. To highlight this further there is a wonderful prayer by an American Presbyterian priest called Richard Halverson who wrote:

‘You go nowhere by accident. Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God has put you there. God has a purpose in your being there. Christ lives in you and has something he wants to do through you where you are.’

I believe that to be 100% true, it’s really is wonderful, however the struggle found within this is that God’s way of doing things and our way rarely match up and so it is here that we find our biggest challenge. **Do we respond to his call or not?**

This week we are introduced to three people who did respond to God’s call, the old testament prophet Jeremiah, the new testament apostle Timothy and the incredible 19th Century missionary Mary Slessor. I wonder if these three can help us make the right choice.

In this week’s reading taken from the book of Jeremiah we hear the story of his call and those extraordinary words where God says to him ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knewyou, before you were born I set you apart’ I have always loved these words because it reinforces that our journeys begin with God, has God in it and ends with God! Just as the previous prayer says. The idea that at some level God has already got his plan going before we are even born is both comforting as we well as terrifying!

**When God calls us to do anything extraordinary the first thing to know is don’t expect anything to be easy!**

Jeremiah was called into prophetic ministry at a pretty tough time in the Israelites timeline. The bible tells us that Jeremiah's ministry was active from the 13th year of Josiah King of Judah 626 BC and spanned across the reigns of five kings of Judah, during that time he prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem which was being brought about because Israel had been unfaithful to the laws of the covenant and amongst other things had forsaken God by worshiping Baal and burning their children as offerings to Moloch.

This had obviously broken the covenant between them and God, so had caused God to withdraw his blessings. It was Jeremiah’s job to proclaim that the nation of Judah would be faced with famine, plundered and taken captive by foreigners who would exile them to a foreign land.

Jeremiah; publicly condemned idolatry, the greed of priests, and what he deemed as false prophets, but by doing so landed himself in some serious hot water, from this he endured persecution, plots against him, he was beaten and ridiculed and attempts made on his life and finally he was imprisoned.

Despite what horrors were to come for Jeremiah he chose to listen to what God wanted him to do, which was to be a prophet during a pretty tough time, the bible tells us that when God first appointed him it was ‘to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant’ And Jeremiah’s first response is ‘Alas I do not know how to speak; to which God replies, ‘Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you…I have put my words in your mouth.’

**As promised when God calls us to his work, he will provide all what is needed.**

Let’s now turn to Timothy,

Born in the city of Lystra in Asia Minor, to a Greek father and Jewish mother. He had been well acquainted with scripture since childhood probably because his mother and grandmother were biblically noted for their piety and faith and although both Jews it didn’t take long for the three of them to become respected members of a Christian congregation! Timothy’s call to evangelise was strong, especially to the Jews, in order to support this, he was even prepared to be circumcised!  **Sometimes we are expected to do things that maybe very painful.**

Timothy met the apostle Paul during his 2nd Missionary journey and from there became his companion and co-worker in preaching along with Silas. He was a great friend to Paul who in return entrusted him with important missional assignments to spread the gospel across the land. As Timothy was preparing to respond to his call, Paul writes to him asking that he devote himself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. Something which he was already well equipped to do. **Sometimes God has been preparing us for his purpose for a long time.** In the reading today Paul reminds Timothy of the importance of what he is doing, ‘We labour and strive, because we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Saviour of all people, and especially of those who believe.Command and teach these things. Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity… because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.

It must have been a great privilege being officially sent into a foreign land to preach the good news and share the kingdom of God! But as we have already learnt from Jeremiah, it’s not always easy to live in those paradigms being called to follow God’s word can often be a tough journey. **So, you need to have your reserves stocked up, you need to keep your saviour close!** This is critical because wherever you go and whatever you do having that little piece of the divine energy from God is what makes your heart glow and your soul sparkle and it’s that same energy that is sacred, raw and free, the same energy that gives you the courage to speak out, to stand up and fight for injustice, it’s the authentic loving touch of your saviour.

After ordination we know that Timothy served in at least 5 churches before becoming the first Bishop of Ephesus and died around the year AD 97, it is thought that he may have been subject to ill health during his time suffering ‘frequent ailments’ and was gaoled at least once! **Enduring ill health and suffering does not stop God using you, often it enhances his work.**

We conclude by exploring the life of Mary Slessor, a Scottish hard-working lass born in the 19th Century, who spent most of her life doing missionary work in Nigeria.

Mary came from a very poor background, growing up in the slums of Scotland with her parents and siblings. After working in the mill and becoming a skilled weaver. She like her mother had a strong interest in religion but her real call was to missionary work, it is said that it wasn’t until David Livingstone the famous missionary and explorer had died did she finally decide that she wanted to follow in his footsteps. **Sometimes God ignites our hearts with the ventures of others.**

She applied to the United Presbyterian Church's Foreign Mission Board and after training in Edinburgh, she set sail for west Africa. Whilst there she very quickly learned the native language and gained the trust of those around her enabling her to express her Christian understanding through education and social welfare. She began to teach about Christianity and promoted women’s rights and proper care of the native children. Of all the work she did, she is most famous for trying to stop the common cultural practice of infanticide of twins who were often left in the bush to starve to death or be eaten by animals. Over the years it is said she saved hundreds of twins sending out her missioners to find and protect them in the Mission House, she even adopted 4 as her own. It was not a particularly easy call to follow working among those with a traditional west African religion and culture that she barely knew, but she happily lived in the compound for 3 years before sadly contracting malaria and having to go home to Scotland to recover. She retuned 16 months later on a new assignment.

As a young missionary in her 20s she was confronted with a lack of education, human sacrifice and the abandoning of twins, her call was to help heal the sick and she even stopped the practice of determining guilt by making the suspects drink poison. Mary could do this because she had an influence on these people because they began to trust in her, her ability to speak the language so fluently brought confidence and she began to enjoy many unreserved friendships. She was typically Scottish, red haired, blue eyes and a bold personality, bit it was what was needed to get the job done! This combined with her strong pastoral skills and sense of humour and natural determination to seek justice is perhaps what made her pleasing to be around.

However, after another 3 years she returned home again with ill health, and again for a third and final time only this time she was nursing her mother and sister, but still continuing to speak at many churches sharing her missionary stories. On returning to Calabar where she was serving, she received the devastating news of the death of her mother and sister. She was overcome with grief wondering to whom she was going to ‘write and tell my stories and nonsense to’ and the realisation that she was alone has dawned on her she had said ‘no one will worry about me if I go up country.’ **God doesn’t leave us to do it alone, he provides others in the world to make things more bearable when it is needed.** Mary had come from hardship and was working in extraordinary hardship, her call had been clear and strong, she knew her purpose in the world, which was great, but she also knew that it would bring great sacrifices too. She continued with her work heading north to an area where male missionaries had been killed, she thought her teachings, and the fact she was a woman, would be less threatening to unreached tribes, she was right and went on to live there among the indigenous peoples for 15 years. She was pragmatic and lived a simple life in a traditional house with Efiks (southern Nigerian ethnic group) her insistence on lone stations often led her into conflict with the authorities and gained her a reputation for eccentricity. However, she was a driving force behind the establishment of practical vocational training to Efiks.

For the last four decades of her life, Slessor suffered intermittent fevers from the malaria she contracted during her first station to Calabar. However, she downplayed the personal costs and continued her focus on evangelism, settling disputes, encouraging trade, establishing social changes and introducing Western education.

In 1892, she became Vice Consul in Okoyong, presiding over the native court. In 1905 she was named vice-president of Ikot Obong native court. In 1913, she was awarded the Order of St. John. Her exploits were heralded in Britain and she became known as the "white queen of Okoyong". She died in 1915 in Calabar and was honoured with the equivalent of a state funeral attendees included the provincial commissioner, along with other senior British officials in full uniform. Flags at government buildings were flown at half-mast and Nigeria's Governor telegraphed his "deepest regrets" from Lagos. A Scottish report on her death stated that "She and her four adopted African children were a centre of great attraction and helped to deepen the interest of the whole community in the Foreign Mission work of the Church." It praises her strong force character, her unostentatious manner, and her zeal for the tribes around Calabar.

Mary a simple working-class girl from Scotland had followed her call from God that lead her to literally save and change the lives of hundreds of people all in the name of Jesus Christ. She could never have predicted what was to come, only God knew that. All she knew was that she had to go and be whatever God needed her to be in that place and that time. **God gives you a feeling to do something that you can’t put down.**

Finally, I was wondering what these very different figures might be able to say to us collectively about what it means to be called. Firstly, it is clear that when we are called, we are called to be either in the midst of change or to actually be that change that is needed in the world. Jeremiah was called to destroy and overthrow and then build and plant, Timothy to set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity and Mary who was called to reform cultures and traditions in order to save lives and create better living environments and all in done in the name of the living God. Secondly, if we don’t think we have the skills, God will provide; Jeremiah said he was too young and didn’t know what to say and God replied ‘Do not be afraid, for I am with you and will rescue you…I have put my words in your mouth.’ Again, with Timothy Paul says, ‘Command and teach these things. Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young’ and with Mary, the extraordinary way that she just was able to pick up the language so easily and well so she could communicate everything that need to be said, after all you can’t preach the word of God if they don’t understand it!

Finally, all three did not have an easy call, during their time the was a great deal of pain, heart ache and compromised physical health, but they all kept going despite it. Why? Because they all knew their call from God was stronger than anything they would have to endure in this life! I think in Timothy’s letter Paul sums it up best when he declares ‘We labour and strive, because we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Saviour of all people, and especially of those who believe.**‘**

So, in conclusion how do you feel now? Do you have some sense of what it might feel like to be called or how you might react if you are? The first thing to acknowledge is that we are not all called in the same way as these three were, so enjoy and feel that great rush of relief wash over you. But he still calls us to be the light to fill in the gaps where he cannot be, he’s not expecting us to change the world overnight, just to be present so we can transform it with Christ’s love. So my prayer is that you will never lose your shine, that you will all be not just the jewels in our Lords crown, but a bit of much needed ‘bling’ in the institution of his church too. Authenticity in God is critical as the church begins to move and grow in this extraordinary time of transition and you are the ones who are being called to be in the change right now.

So, let’s return to our question. Do we respond to his call or not?

I want you to be mindful that the Hebrew word for the verb to anoint is mashach, it has it’s root in the word messiah, which means the anointed one and so to be anointed by God is another way of saying that you have been chosen by him to do something really special that only you can do, think on that, **that only you can do**. And what you do may not seem like much, but if it is God given then it will be infinitely vaster then you could ever imagine. Remember that famous quote from Mother Teresa who humbly declared that ‘We can’t all do great things, but we can all do small things with great love.’

And it is that love that keeps returning you back to the God that called you. Amen

***P.s if you would like a super quick summary of what to means ‘to be called’ just go back over the sermon and just read the highlighted dark print!***