

QUESTIONS THE LORD ASKS – ‘WHAT IS THAT IN YOUR HAND?’

Ex 4:1-17; Jn 6:1-14

There is a certain Christian legend that says that God has placed each of us in the world with a special message to deliver, a special song to sing, a special act of love to share – something that can make our world a better place. It’s a lovely thought, isn’t it? And I believe its true. None of us is here by accident.

It reminds me of the words of Oscar Hammerstein in one of his musicals, ‘A bell’s not a bell ‘til you ring it, a song’s not a song ‘til you sing it, the love in your heart wasn’t put there to stay, for love isn’t love ‘til you give it away.’

The problem is that sometimes we aren’t sure that we have ‘a song to sing’, or if we do have a song, we’re not sure how to sing it. Moses felt a bit like that. God meets him at the burning bush and tells him that He has a special purpose for him – a special message to declare; a special song to sing. But Moses says to the Lord, ‘I don’t know how to speak, rather send someone else.’ In other words, he is saying, ‘Lord, I can’t really sing this song you have for me. And in any case, I’m sure there is someone who can sing this song better than I can.’

Isn’t that how we sometimes respond? - ‘Lord, I am nobody; I am just an ordinary person; I’m just a lay person; I’m too old or I’m too young; I don’t know enough about the Bible.’ In other words, ‘I can’t sing, and in any case, I don’t know the words.’ But you know what? God has heard all those excuses before – they are as old as Moses himself. And He isn’t accepting any excuses. Why? Because He knows they are not true. He Himself has given us a song to sing and a voice to sing it.

Having listened to some of Moses’ excuses the Lord asks the question, ‘What is that in your hand?’ In his hand Moses is holding his shepherd’s staff, his shepherd’s stick. God tells him to throw it on the ground and it turns into a snake and when he picks it up it becomes a stick again. God also tells Moses to put his hand inside his cloak, and when he brings it back out it is infected with white spots; but when he puts it back again it comes out clean once more.

So God is showing Moses that God has given him abilities and powers. And with those he will be able to speak with authority to the Pharaoh and the Israelite leaders. Moses won’t be going empty-handed. He has something in his hand; he has a powerful message to proclaim, an important song to sing.

In the gospel we heard that lovely story of the little boy who offers what he has in his hand – five rolls and two small fish. He could have said to himself, ‘Why should I even worry to offer these to Jesus. They are so little, so insignificant. But somehow this boy realises that he has this contribution to make; he has something in his hands, and he offers it to Jesus. And Jesus is able to do something great with it. And because of that, that young boy’s song is still being sung; his story is still being proclaimed 2000 years later.

So, the Lord says to us as He did to Moses, ‘What is that in your hand?’ What do have that you can share for the building up of the Church and the extension of My love in the world? What talents; what abilities? In one of our congregations in South Africa there was a woman with an artistic talent. One day she brought Angela and me a framed sketch showing three drawings of her hand in different positions. As she gave us the picture she said, ‘This is a symbol of giving you my hands. I want to be available to work in any way you see fit.’ That’s an illustration of what each of us can do for the Lord.

Last week Joy Foreman ‘phoned me, saying that she feels very frustrated that, because of her health, she is not able to do the different things that she used to do in the church. We spoke about it and it ended up with her here at the church on Friday afternoon, painting boxes for the holiday club!

What are some of the things that we have that we can offer for our service to the Lord and to others? In his book, ‘The Purpose Driven Life’, Rick Warren describes five things to consider in discovering what we can do. He uses the acronym SHAPE.

S – Spiritual gifts. The NT mentions a whole number of these gifts - the gift of speaking, teaching, of healing, of administration, of giving, of caring and so on. The Bible says that every Christian has at least one such gift. The best way to discover one’s gift is really through trial and error – experimenting in different areas to see where one is effective. If you experiment with teaching children, for example, and the children fall asleep or run away, it’s probably not your gift. Then you can then experiment with something else. Maybe you do visits to shut-ins and you find that both you and the other person are blessed. That’s a good indication that you have a gift for that.

The H of SHAPE stands for heart. Think about something for which you really have a heart, a passion. Is there some area about which you feel passionate – teaching the Bible; caring for the sick; sharing your faith with others. That heart passion can be an indication of one’s place of usefulness in the church.

A – Abilities. All of us have many different abilities. Studies indicate that the average person has over 500 abilities. Some are common to most people, like reading, writing, walking, listening. Others only some people will have – drawing, woodwork, baking, playing an instrument etc. Many of those abilities can be used in serving others. ‘What is it that you have in your hand?’

I was thinking about Joy’s late husband, George, who made a lot of the items of woodwork in this sanctuary. He used his ability in a positive and constructive way. (Unlike the other George Foreman, who used his hands in a rather negative and destructive way!)

P is for personality. Our personalities vary, and they make us more suited to some areas of service than others. Introverts usually prefer working on their own in or small groups rather than big ones. The outgoing nature of extroverts makes them suited to different activities.

E – Experience. All of us have experienced many things in our lives. Some of those are good, others bad. But many of them can enable us in reaching out to others. For example, I have struggled with depression during my life. That helps me to relate to others who struggle in a similar way. You may have experienced the pain of losing a child. That painful experience can help you in reaching out to others who have suffered in the same way.

Besides our gifts, passions, abilities and experiences, there are also the material gifts and resources that we have in our hands. The obvious one is our money and offering that in service to the Lord is something that each of us can do.

The Lord says to us as He said to Moses, ‘What do you have in your hand?’ We can either keep our hands shut tight, holding onto what we have, or we can open our hands and offer what we have in service to God and others. Each of us has a contribution to make; we each have a song to sing. But a song’s not a song ‘til we sing it, a bell’s not a bell ‘til we ring it; the love in our heart wasn’t put there to stay, for love isn’t love ‘til we give it away.’ Amen.