

Called to Ordination – Beginning with the end in mind

‘Tomorrow you will turn you back on every other human ambition, and commit yourself to living a cross-shaped life.’ These words, spoken by Bishop Trevor the day before my ordination, were bracing, to say the least. But getting to this point was not entirely straightforward.

Early in life I’d felt a call to ordained ministry. So when I moved from Queensland to Canberra to begin work in the public service, I thought (like many new graduates do), that my Canberra experience would just be a short rest-stop before theological study.

But leaving aside lots of minor detours, including a stint in the Army, my move to Canberra signalled something far more significant. It marked the beginning of a long period in which two seemingly contradictory lessons grew up alongside each other.

The first was just the sheer value and goodness of so-called ‘secular’ work. I found there was work to be done that was fascinating and stimulating. There were positive relationships to be enjoyed with colleagues - not simply as a means to sharing the gospel (although of course this privilege came up from time to time), but as good things in themselves.

I began to notice, with alarm, how little Christian teaching I’d received about ‘work’. The workplace is, after all, the arena where much of the Christian life is lived out as an offering to God. I came to deeply appreciate the richness of the Biblical testimony on the goodness, the joy, the value – and yes, the frustrations – of regular work. On the whole, it felt good to be in the thick of it.

After a decade in the public service I found myself as a senior intelligence analyst in the Office of National Assessments. It was interesting work, there was a healthy travel budget, great colleagues, and even a half-decent coffee machine.

Yet there was a second lesson that was dawning on me at the same time, which threatened my sense of comfort and professional satisfaction.

In Stephen Covey’s classic, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, one of the key habits he identifies is ‘beginning with the end in mind’. That is, our lives should be lived in a way that makes sense, given what we value for the future.

It just so happens that the New Testament has a great deal to say about the ‘end’ we should have in mind. However much we are inclined to avoid or soften the New Testament’s language, it’s testimony is clear enough: that *we all*, in St Paul’s language, *must appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body* (2 Corinthians 5:10).

Dr Johnson famously said that the man who knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight finds that it concentrates his mind wonderfully. So too does honest reflection on our accountability to Christ for the way we have used the gifts we’ve been given. It certainly

began to concentrate my mind in an increasingly uncomfortable direction, exposing how prone I was to finding my status and identity in my work and middle class comforts.

Eventually I began to count the costs. The financial costs, of course, but more significantly, the more existential costs. If I put myself forward for ordination, my carefully crafted niche within the social economy of Canberra would be no more. (People basically know how to talk to a middle-manager in the APS. But what do you say to a priest?)

Telling my colleagues of my decision confirmed my intuitions. I don't think their responses would have been much different if I'd told them I'd been diagnosed with terminal cancer: a momentary loss for words, clarifying questions, awkward expressions of well-wishing, all mingled with looks of concern and puzzlement.

And yet since making that break, 8 years ago now, I've never had reason to doubt the fundamental rightness of that call, nor to doubt the abundant provisions of God at every step along the way. On the other hand, I've had every reason to be confirmed in my conviction of the utterly vital role in human history that is played by Christ's church; that despite its often scratchy appearance, when all is said and done there is no public service department, or institution of any kind, that matches the cosmic significance of the Christian church – the place where Christ, the Son of God, is proclaimed.

To 'begin with the end in mind' will look different for each of us. But whether the implications are behavioural, vocational, or fall into some other domain, I'm quite certain that none of us will be hurt, and many of us will be helped, by more extensive reflection on the fact that we shall all appear before the judgement seat of Christ.

Rev'd Dave McLennan

Rector, St Mary in the Valley Anglican Church, South Tuggeranong.