

Jonathan Aitken Sermon for 24 March 2019
Lower Chapel, Eton College

**JONATHAN AITKEN SERMON
ETON COLLEGE
LOWER CHAPEL**

SUNDAY 24 March 2019

ISAIAH 6: 1-8

What do you think of, when you hear the word, A Call?

A telephone call? A call of nature? A wake-up call?

When I was a lower boy the most annoying call was a boy call.

In the far-off days of fagging in the 1950s Members of the Library who wanted an errand run would take a deep breath and yell at full volume "Boooy"

All the lower boys in the house had to sprint to the Library. The last one to arrive was fagged to do the errand which would be something like delivering a note to the Captain of Games in another House about a fixture.

Mercifully Boy calls have long been abolished.

But some calls ring down the millennia of history.

Our reading this morning, known as *The Call of Isaiah*, is probably the most famous call in the history of Judaeo Christian religion.

What happened was that in 547 BC – the year that King Uzziah died – a posh well-connected young man about town in Jerusalem was walking through the Temple when he had an alarming vision which some scholars believe may have been caused by the earthquake which struck Jerusalem in that year.

Isaiah saw all sorts of strange scenes in his vision. The climax came when he heard a mysterious voice from an exalted throne saying to him: “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?”

Isaiah unhesitatingly responded “Here am I send me”.

It was an answer that led to him becoming the greatest prophet in Old Testament Israel.

Now some of you will hear calls in your lives, no doubt less dramatic than the *Call of Isaiah*

But your call may still have the potential to be a life changing summons.

Calls are different from job offers or sports challenges or opportunities to do charitable work.

Calls are usually not to do with occupations. They are vocations. The word derives from the Latin word Voceo – I call.

In my own life I have felt 'called' three times.

When I was at Oxford reading for a Law Degree with the intention of becoming a barrister some inner voice seemed to be saying to me "Do something much more adventurous".

So I did and went off into the most adventurous activity I could think of – journalism which in the 1960s was a badly paid and unfashionable world which attracted very few Etonians.

After starting out in my first job which – I kid you not - was Assistant Tennis and Funerals Correspondent for the *East Anglian Daily Times*, in due course I graduated to becoming a war correspondent in Vietnam. This certainly provided adventure. Like the young Winston Churchill I discovered that there were few more exhilarating experiences in life than being shot at and missed.

Yet after a year or two of reporting from the battlefields of Vietnam I started to think that writing about things was less fulfilling than actually doing things.

So I began to feel called to the arena of public service through politics.

Now that **was** rather fashionable in those days.

When Harold Macmillan was Prime Minister he had so many OE's in his Cabinet that comedians used to joke that there should be a Royal Warrant sign in School Yard saying:

Eton – by appointment – Cabinet Makers to HM The Queen.

Anyway, I did fulfil that vocation and I spent 24 years in the House of Commons as an MP and Minister – coincidentally serving in the Cabinet at the same time as The Provost.

But then I made a complete Horlicks of my political career. I told a lie on oath in a libel case, was prosecuted for perjury, pleaded guilty and was sent to prison for 18 months - a spectacular "Fall from Grace" as the headlines said.

While I was in prison I did a lot of self-examination of my conscience and life style.

I discovered, as monks have done down the centuries, that cells can be great places in which to pray.

I may have heard 'a call' to repentance.

For after I came out of prison I had another interesting career change.

I set off for the one institution in Britain that had worse food, worst plumbing and more uncomfortable beds than a prison – an Anglican theological college Wycliffe Hall, Oxford.

There I spent two happy years reading for a degree in Theology. Most of my fellow students were trainee vicars and some of them said, “why don’t you join our club?”

But although I thought about it I didn’t respond like Isaiah

Instead I said in effect “No thank you I don’t feel I have a religious vocation. I am not good enough or worthy enough to become a priest.”

I decided instead to look for an occupation such as employment in business consultancy or writing books or returning to journalism. So that’s what I did for the next 15 years.

But then the strange call of a vocation started again.

One of the features of any vocation is that ‘a call’ can be stronger than you. Sometimes it runs contrary to your personal priorities and wishes.

In my case about two years ago when saying my daily prayers I seemed to be hearing Godly murmurs along the lines of:

“I want you to serve me as an ordained priest”

Now this was the last thing I wanted to hear. So I replied, I hope politely, along the lines of:

“Please God, don’t be ridiculous! I am over 70 and far too old. I wouldn’t be any good as a vicar. I would have to give up all sorts of nice things in my life”.

But God’s call can be persistent and powerful.

So today I am an ordained prison chaplain serving in HMP Pentonville.

It’s a 175 year old London prison described by its cons and screws as “a tough nick”.

Ministering there to the suicide attempters, the self self-harmers, the mentally ill, the depressed, the drug takers and the sometimes violent men on the Wings is pastoral life at the sharp end.

But I love the challenges of it. And perhaps I am some use as a member of our overworked and understaffed chaplaincy team because of my past as an ex-prisoner. This makes it easier to strike up a rapport with the men by saying to them "I have been where you now are". This often leads to a conversation and sometimes to a prayer.

I believe I am the second old Etonian ever to be a prison chaplain. The first one, who inspired me, was C.T Studd. He was the Captain of the XI here in the 1920s and went on to play for Cambridge University and for England in many Test matches.

When C.T. Studd was asked why he wanted to become a prison chaplain he wrote a verse of doggerel:

"Some want to live within the sound
Of church or chapel bell;
I want to run a rescue shop,
Within a yard of hell."

His was a remarkable vocation.

Why am I telling you all this?

Because I have sixth sense here that in Lower Chapel one day there are some of you who may one day be called to a vocation in your chosen field.

Spiritual vocations can be particularly demanding and even painful.

If you were listening to the reading you may have noticed that Isaiah's first reaction to his call was "Woe is me".

Then he went through the ordeal of having a live coal placed on his lips.

But in the end Isaiah responded unconditionally and wholeheartedly: "Here am I, send me".

My prayer today is that some of you may in time feel called to your vocation and that you will respond to your call in the spirit of Isaiah: "Here am I send me".

AMEN