

Mark 1:9-14

Affirmation for service

No use?

Have you heard people running themselves down saying that they are useless, no good at anything? Perhaps you have said something of the kind yourself? We can overdo that, swing away too far from boasting, fail to appreciate the gifts and abilities we have – or we misunderstand the wide range of tasks to which God calls us to and for which he equips us. I have been known to say “I know you to be good at least two things that are in high demand in God’s service”. And people wonder what I’m on about and perhaps ask “What do you mean?” And I will say “You can make a cup of tea – and you’re good at cheering people up!” The gifts of hospitality and encouragement are gifts that are very much needed – no more so than in the current climate.

Sending out

Of course, there are times when other gifts are needed too but let’s home in on what Jesus needed as he faced the prospect of his time of testing in the wilderness. As always, Mark keeps his narrative short and to the point. In only a handful of verses he gives us the baptism of Jesus, the affirmation of Jesus’ ministry by the Holy Spirit and the Father AND the temptations in the wilderness! Jesus was about to face the most testing time of his life to date. We’re not told why he was to face these profound temptations alone – perhaps it was in preparation for the ultimate test at Calvary – when once again he would face intense temptation without the support of most of his earthly friends – the disciples having largely deserted him. Whatever else happened at his baptism – it was for Jesus an affirmation that he was his Father’s Son and that he was being equipped to do his heavenly Father’s will. He was being sent out with the responsibility for the salvation of the world. Giving in to the evil one’s temptation wouldn’t have been a temporary setback (as it might be when we succumb to temptation). The whole of God’s plan and purpose to redeem and save humanity from sin rested upon Jesus’ shoulders. If he should fail, then God’s plan would have been frustrated – there was no Plan B. So, God affirms his Son and sends him out in the power of the Spirit – not accompanied by a fanfare but quietly, in solitude, to pray and be tested in the wilderness. He sends him out – with encouragement!

Affirm for service

In the church, ordination is the most public and formal affirmation that we give to people whom we believe have been chosen and equipped to serve God in a particular way in ministry – as Elder or Minister. The person is not empowered by every conceivable gifting through the act of ordination – some of the gifting would have been apparent in the selection and training processes and some will come through their experience in the months and years to follow as they exercise their ministry and experience affirmation both from God and God’s people. But at the outset, ordination or setting apart, or some other form of acknowledgement and encouragement gives to those embarking on a new form or aspect of Christian service is important. If God felt that Jesus needed particular encouragement and affirmation as he embarked on his

ministry, then we shouldn't think we need it any less. We may create an artificial distinction here and imagine that such affirmation is only required for certain people. Yes, there may be a particular need for a formal affirmation for the likes of Ministry of Word and Sacrament but actually in a more informal way, there is a lot to be said for affirming people in advance of Christian service. Why would someone about to begin serving in a new outreach role in a congregation be any less in need of encouragement and support? They may not need a formal service or act but surely having other believers affirm them in a new role and encourage them in it would be of real benefit. Affirmation and encouragement (and maybe some cups of tea and coffee!) are every bit as appropriate for those engaging in non-ministerial avenues of service or without a particular job title as for those in the traditional forms of ministry.

For service

Perhaps this short passage should remind us that affirmation and encouragement are always with a view to service that follows. It's not that we make a fuss of someone for no reason. Mark doesn't make a big thing of it but there is no doubt that seeking to fulfil his heavenly Father's role for him was going to be no easy task for Jesus – the temptations in the wilderness, the opposition from both the political and religious leadership of the day and the ultimate challenge of laying down his life on the cross for our salvation was to be an extended and profound test of Jesus' love, faithfulness and loyalty to God and to us. It wasn't all about spiritual highs and experiences of constant joy - the affirmation and profound experience of his Father's words and the Spirit's presence must have been wonderful and a real boost to him as he began his public ministry in earnest – but there were to be extended and profound opposition and testing (way beyond 3 specific temptations in the wilderness) and he would have to rely on much less obvious though nonetheless significant support from God in his subsequent ministry. And that goes for all of us too – whether we have been ordained or not. God equips us for service – not just to enjoy the experience of affirmation by a congregation or a group of our friends in God's name. Affirmation and initial support can set us off on the right track; God's and our friends' encouragement can be a real boost along the way – but for the most part we will serve God without fanfare or fuss – we will have to face the setbacks and knocks, sometimes alone, often with little outward support – but God's promise hold good – HE will be with us always. But let's make no bones about it - service for God can be tough, wearing, sapping of energy – so we shouldn't imagine that it will be an easy ride – it will be hard work and challenging - but it will be satisfying.

It doesn't do to run ourselves down, even when it comes to matters of faith. God has a place for us – and if we're stuck for what to do then – providing a cuppa and/or a quiet word of encouragement are going to be in regular demand! Affirmation and encouragement are wonderful grace gifts from God that give needed support to God's people in challenging times, not least as we embark upon serving – God and others for his sake!

May the Lord bless you! Amen.