

THOU God in Christ,
 There is no ground anywhere that is not holy ground, for in the cool of the evening thou hast walked upon it and in the heat of the day thou hast died upon it, and at the coming of dawn thou hast returned and art always and everywhere returning to it and to us who walk upon it too, this holy ground, though heedless of its holiness. O make us whole. Set us free.

Thou didst shape us each in the darkness of a womb to give us life and thou knowest us each by name, and not one is forgotten by thee, not one but is precious in thy sight—the ugly with the beautiful, the criminal with the child, the enemy with the friend. Lord, give us eyes to see each other and ourselves more nearly as thou seest us, to see beneath each face we meet, and beneath even our own faces, thy face.

Help us to know that for each thou hast died as though he were the only one.
Amen.



The Calling of Voices

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim; each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.”

And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

Then flew one of the seraphim to me, having in his hand a burning coal which he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth, and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin forgiven.” And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send me.” And he said, “Go. . . .”

ISAIAH 6:1-9

“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”

MATTHEW 4:4

on a snowy morning. And then it was like the phone ringing in the night again or the seagull riding the gray wind. It was a summons that he had to answer somehow or, at considerable cost, not answer.

Or in the year that King Uzziah died, or in the year that John F. Kennedy died, or in the year that somebody you loved died, you go into the temple if that is your taste, or you hide your face in the little padded temple of your hands, and a voice says, "Whom shall I send into the pain of a world where people die?" and if you are not careful, you may find yourself answering, "Send me." You may hear the voice say, "Go." Just *go*.

Like "duty," "law," "religion," the word "vocation" has a dull ring to it, but in terms of what it means, it is really not dull at all. *Vocare*, to call, of course, and a man's vocation is a man's calling. It is the work that he is called to in this world, the thing that he is summoned to spend his life doing. We can speak of a man's choosing his vocation, but perhaps it is at least as accurate to speak of a vocation's choosing the man, of a call's being given and a man's hearing it, or not hearing it. And maybe that is the place to start: the business of listening and hearing. A man's life is full of all sorts of voices calling him in all sorts of directions. Some of them are voices from inside and some of them are voices from outside. The more alive and alert we are, the more clamorous our lives are. Which do we listen to? What kind of voice do we listen for?

There is a sad and dangerous little game that people play when they get to be a certain age. It is a form of solitaire. They get out their class yearbook, and look at the pictures of the classmates they knew best and recall the days

The telephone rings late one night, and you jump out of your skin; you try for a while to pretend that it is not ringing, but after a while you answer it because otherwise you will never know who it is, and it might be anybody, anybody. Then a voice says, "Listen, something has happened. Something has got to be done. I know you are busy. I know you have lots on your mind. But you've got to come. For God's sake."

Or you are walking along an empty beach toward the end of the day, and there is a gray wind blowing, and a seagull with a mussel shell in its beak flaps up and up, and then lets the shell drop to the rocks below, and there is something so wild and brave and beautiful about it that you have to write it into a poem or paint it into a picture or sing it into a song; or if you are no good at any of these, you have to live out at least the rest of that day in a way that is somehow true to the little scrap of wonder that you have seen.

Or I think of the school church that I served for a time where the offering each week was given to an institution for retarded children, and when the plate was passed around, some of the students, resentful of having to go to church at all, would drop in their penny or would drop in nothing at all. Then maybe someday a friend would drag one of them down to where the money went, and he would get to know some one of the children a little, and when he went back another day, the child would come running up to him in a way that made him suddenly see, with a kind of panic almost, that for that child, the sight of him was Christmas morning and a rocket to the moon and the no-school whistle

THE SEARCH

when they first knew them in school, ten or twenty years ago or whatever it was. They think about all the exciting, crazy, wonderfully characteristic things their classmates used to be interested in and about the kind of dreams they had about what they were going to do when they graduated and about the kind of dreams that maybe they had for some of them. Then they think about what those classmates actually did with their lives, what they are doing with them now ten or twenty years later. I make no claim that the game is always sad or that when it seems to be sad our judgment is always right, but once or twice when I have played it myself, sadness has been a large part of what I have felt. Because in my class, at the school that I went to, as in any class at any school, there were students who had a real flair, a real talent, for something. Maybe it was for writing or acting or sports. Maybe it was an interest and a joy in working with people toward some common goal, a sense of responsibility for people who in some way had less than they had or were less. Sometimes it was just their capacity for being so alive that made you more alive to be with them. Yet now, a good many years later, I have the feeling that more than just a few of them are spending their lives at work in which none of these gifts is being used, at work they seem to be working at with neither much pleasure nor any sense of accomplishment. This is the sadness of the game, and the danger of it is that maybe we find that in some measure we are among them or that we are too blind to see that we are.

When you are young, I think, your hearing is in some ways better than it is ever going to be again. You hear better than most people the voices that call to you out of your own life to give yourself to this work or that work. When you are

THE CALLING OF VOICES

young, before you accumulate responsibilities, you are freer than most people to choose among all the voices and to answer the one that speaks most powerfully to who you are and to what you really want to do with your life. But the danger is that there are so many voices, and they all in their ways sound so promising. The danger is that you will not listen to the voice that speaks to you through the seagull mounting the gray wind, say, or the vision in the temple, that you do not listen to the voice inside you or to the voice that speaks from outside but specifically to you out of the specific events of your life, but that instead you listen to the great blaring, boring, banal voice of our mass culture, which threatens to deafen us all by blasting forth that the only thing that really matters about your work is how much it will get you in the way of salary and status, and that if it is gladness you are after, you can save that for weekends. In fact one of the grimmer notions that we seem to inherit from our Puritan forbears is that work is not even supposed to be glad but, rather, a kind of penance, a way of working off the guilt that you accumulate during the hours when you are not working.

The world is full of people who seem to have listened to the wrong voice and are now engaged in life-work in which they find no pleasure or purpose and who run the risk of suddenly realizing someday that they have spent the only years that they are ever going to get in this world doing something which could not matter less to themselves or to anyone else. This does not mean, of course, people who are doing work that from the outside looks unglamorous and humdrum, because obviously such work as that may be a crucial form of service and deeply creative. But it means

people who are doing work that seems simply irrelevant not only to the great human needs and issues of our time but also to their own need to grow and develop as humans.

In John Marquand's novel *Point of No Return*, for instance, after years of apple-polishing and bucking for promotion and dedicating all his energies to a single goal, Charlie Gray finally gets to be vice-president of the fancy little New York bank where he works; and then the terrible moment comes when he realizes that it is really not what he wanted after all, when the prize that he has spent his life trying to win suddenly turns to ashes in his hands. His promotion assures him and his family of all the security and standing that he has always sought, but Marquand leaves you with the feeling that maybe the best way Charlie Gray could have supported his family would have been by giving his life to the kind of work where he could have expressed himself and fulfilled himself in such a way as to become in himself, as a person, the kind of support they really needed.

There is also the moment in the Gospels where Jesus is portrayed as going into the wilderness for forty days and nights and being tempted there by the devil. And one of the ways that the devil tempts him is to wait until Jesus is very hungry from fasting and then to suggest that he simply turn the stones into bread and eat. Jesus answers, "Man shall not live by bread alone," and this just happens to be, among other things, true, and very close to the same truth that Charlie Gray comes to when he realizes too late that he was not made to live on status and salary alone but that something crucially important was missing from his life even though he was not sure what it was any more than, perhaps, Marquand himself was sure what it was.

There is nothing moralistic or sentimental about this truth. It means for us simply that we must be careful with our lives, for Christ's sake, because it would seem that they are the only lives we are going to have in this puzzling and perilous world, and so they are very precious and what we do with them matters enormously. Everybody knows that. We need no one to tell it to us. Yet in another way perhaps we do always need to be told, because there is always the temptation to believe that we have all the time in the world, whereas the truth of it is that we do not. We have only a life, and the choice of how we are going to live it must be our own choice, not one that we let the world make for us. Because surely Marquand was right that for each of us there comes a point of no return, a point beyond which we no longer have life enough left to go back and start all over again.

To Isaiah, the voice said, "Go," and for each of us there are many voices that say it, but the question is which one will we obey with our lives, which of the voices that call is to be the one that we answer. No one can say, of course, except each for himself, but I believe that it is possible to say at least this in general to all of us: we should go with our lives where we most need to go and where we are most needed.

Where we most need to go. Maybe that means that the voice we should listen to most as we choose a vocation is the voice that we might think we should listen to least, and that is the voice of our own gladness. What can we do that makes us gladder, what can we do that leaves us with the strongest sense of sailing true north and of peace, which is much of what gladness is? Is it making things with our hands out of wood or stone or paint on canvas? Or is it making

something we hope like truth out of words? Or is it making people laugh or weep in a way that cleanses their spirit? I believe that if it is a thing that makes us truly glad, then it is a good thing and it is our thing and it is the calling voice that we were made to answer with our lives.

And also, where we are most needed. In a world where there is so much drudgery, so much grief, so much emptiness and fear and pain, our gladness in our work is as much needed as we ourselves need to be glad. If we keep our eyes and ears open, our hearts open, we will find the place surely. The phone will ring and we will jump not so much out of our skin as into our skin. If we keep our lives open, the right place will find us.

Jesus said, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God," and in the end every word that proceeds from the mouth of God is the same word, and the word is Christ himself. And in the end that is the vocation, the calling of all of us, the calling to be Christs. To be Christs in whatever way we are able to be. To be Christs with whatever gladness we have and in whatever place, among whatever brothers we are called to. That is the vocation, the destiny to which we were all of us called even before the foundations of the world.



THOU, Who art the God no less of those who know thee not than of those who love thee well, be present with us at the times of choosing when time stands still and all that lies behind and all that lies ahead are caught up in the mystery of

a moment. Be present especially with the young who must choose between many voices. Help them to know how much an old world needs their youth and gladness. Help them to know that there are words of truth and healing that will never be spoken unless they speak them, and deeds of compassion and courage that will never be done unless they do them. Help them never to mistake success for victory or failure for defeat. Grant that they may never be entirely content with whatever bounty the world may bestow upon them, but that they may know at last that they were created not for happiness but for joy, and that joy is to him alone who, sometimes with tears in his eyes, commits himself in love to thee and to his brothers. Lead them and all thy world ever deeper into the knowledge that finally all men are one and that there can never really be joy for any until there is joy for all. In Christ's name we ask it and for his sake. *Amen.*