

# **Discipleship – then and now**

## **The method of vocational reading**

### **By John Vincent**

#### **Can we do this with the text?**

##### **The vocational perspective**

I owe the title 'Vocational Reading' to Liam Purcell. He rightly perceived that what I call 'Practice Reading' implied as at least one of its elements the question of vocation – that is, what the 'call' of the passage or text is or could be.

This rightly brings a new strand into the way we look at Gospel passages:

1. What were the ways the first disciples received this as a 'call' to do something – and what did they do?
2. What were the ways the first readers received this as a 'call' to do something – and what did they do?
3. What were the ways that would-be disciples through history received this as a 'call' to do something – and what did they do?
4. What are the ways in which contemporary disciples today receive this as a 'call' to do something – and what do they do?
5. What are the ways in which I might today receive this as a 'call' to do something – and what could I do?

We can in fact identify different methods in contemporary gospel scholarship in which these 'moments' are sought out:

1. First disciples – historical critical reading.
2. First readers – reader response reading.
3. Disciples through history – reception reading.
4. Contemporary disciples – practice reading.
5. Contemporary reader / hearer – vocational reading.

See *Mark: Gospel of Action* for examples of no. 4 and studies of the rest. The 'vocational' is in fact the way that many of the 'practice' readings turn out.

The contemporary reader/hearer thus stands on the shoulders of all these preceding disciples, and learns something of what the call has been felt by them to constitute. But then, at the end of the day, she/he has to pluck up courage and say, 'Well, I think this bit is for me, too. And I'll add my own discipleship attempts to all the myriad 'products' from it that have gone before.'

So, how does vocational reading work out for us as readers / hearers or would-be disciples today?

#### **Is it really for me?**

##### **Personal vocational questions**

Like all our sisters and brothers in the discipleship tradition, we hear the word of the call, discuss it with others, compare it with similar stories elsewhere (including outside Bible and Christianity), as well as attend to the details of the text and its place in the whole Gospel.

Like all who have gone before, my context and my personal history are unique. And I am unique, just as they were. So I have to re-contextualise the call into my own personal situation. As with all the past instances, the call is taken to be or to mean

certain things by the would-be disciple. The would-be disciple has to take her / his life into their own hands, and say, 'Well, as for me and my life, this is the way it turns out.'

Several things need to be said about the 'call', the 'vocation', from a text:

1. It's always a matter of debate and discernment. Even if it 'shouts at me', I still have to think about it.
2. If what you get for your own life is so different in essence from what others have got from it, then you might question it. Your 'hearing' stands in a tradition of hearings by previous disciples.
3. You could say, Well, every part of this text does not seem to be for me (at least at present), but some parts are for me. What do I do with the bits that are relevant for me?
4. You are looking for the positive in the text.  
Many readers seem to use scripture negatively. They have eagle eyes to discover odd or ridiculous or untranslatable elements. Far better, look not for what is not for you, but for what is for you. Go for what is going for you!
5. Be modest and specific, but also bold.  
You are never going to do the whole thing, or be a complete disciple. But somewhere in there, in this text or another one, there could be the vital thing that is *for you*. So that you say, I'll not bother with all the bits I don't understand or accept or feel challenged by. I'll go for the one bit that I can understand or accept or feel challenged by. Or, I'll go for that which, despite everything, 'calls' me, even though I don't understand or accept or feel challenged.
6. Remember that to respond to a 'call' is an act of faith.  
You can't prove it will be useful or wise to follow it. But you have this constant niggle, this irremovable hunch, this 'sense of call', that you have to follow, and see what happens, and take what comes. As like as not, it will not be a 'personal call' in your soul, as a direct call of Christ. But the niggle, the hunch, the sense, is still a call.
7. Call can be for an immediate, possible, available action, or it can be for a long-term or lifetime commitment or job – or for bits of both.

## What is your 'big issue'?

### Vocation in context

The SCM/Ashram pocketbook, *Discipleship*, just published, provides a good aid to 'bringing it all back home'. For yourself as a student or postgrad or fellow traveller, your context might well have elements argued about in *Discipleship*. Like:

- I'm faced with fundamentalists on one side, and humanists on the other. What is my distinctive call? Is it to 'Be Different'? (Chapter 1)
- I'm pressured to concentrate on my good subjects and let them decide what I will do. But is that all there is? Should I 'Be Mobile'? (Chapter 2)
- I have to conform to a lot of lifestyle assumptions. But is that the end of it? What is a 'Discipleship Lifestyle'? (Chapter 3)
- I've got qualifications, and will get a car, and money. But what do I really need? What 'Lifestyle Project' would help? (Chapter 4)
- Life seems a constant rollercoaster, adding more and more things and people. What about a 'Journey Downwards'? How do you really 'Gain Life'? (Chapter 5)
- Qualifications and Promotions prepare me for Leadership, yet there is this call to Servanthood. Is there 'Servant Leadership'? (Chapter 6)

- Friends and colleagues determine a lot of the things I do. Could I choose 'With Whom to Be'? What Community might help? (Chapter 7)
- Economics and politics seem to decide most things. Is there an alternative way? What prophetic groups are there? (Chapter 8)

## **Books**

John Vincent, *Discipleship*. SCM/Ashram. £2.50

John Vincent, ed. *Mark: Gospel of Action*. SPCK, £14.99

John Vincent, *Outworkings: Gospel Practice and Interpretation*. UTU, £3.00

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See: [www.ashram.org.uk](http://www.ashram.org.uk) and [www.utusheffield.fsnet.co.uk](http://www.utusheffield.fsnet.co.uk)