

I

ON TURNING ASIDE

One of the characteristics that allows someone in the midst of an ordinary, everyday existence to encounter God is their ability to turn aside from what they are doing and to notice the daisy or the rainbow or the burning bush in the midst of the mundane. I often wonder, however, what might have happened if Moses had not turned aside at the burning bush. What if, at the crucial moment a sheep had fallen dangerously and needed rescuing so that he didn't notice that the bush was burning, or what if he did notice but it was a meal time and he thought he might investigate at a more convenient moment, or what if he decided it wasn't that spectacular after all and not worth turning aside to see? Of course we cannot know, because it didn't happen. No more than we can know what might have happened if we had turned aside, on those countless moments when the sunbeam broke through, when the daisy mirrored heaven, when someone was ready to talk, and we didn't notice. Our lives are peppered with myriad potential 'what ifs'. What if we had done this, not that? What if we hadn't done that?

Living a faithful ordinary life is not about torturing ourselves with the endless 'what ifs', so much as it is about focusing ourselves on the 'what might bes'. If Moses had missed the moment and not turned aside, he might well have missed his encounter with God at the burning bush, but there would have been other encounters, other times

when God broke through and spoke. Reflecting on what we might have missed could so easily become an exercise in regret, in living out our lives in wistful longing for what could have been if only ... instead, the calling to faithful, ordinary living is about reflecting on what we might have missed, so that we don't miss it again; so that the next time the occasion arises we are primed and ready to go.

Part of this is simply training ourselves to be the kind of people who *do* turn aside. People who are not so fixed on the path we tread that our curiosity cannot be piqued so that we turn off and meet something new. People whose horizons stretch beyond the grind of life's rat-run, who simply look up from time to time, and see the bush burning, or the sunbeam breaking through. People who when they see these things recognize them for the potential they offer and who turn aside in the hope of an encounter with God. Turning aside is the most ordinary of actions but can have the most extraordinary of consequences, as Moses discovered.



I On curiosity and taking time

Exodus 3.1-3 Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.'

For further reading: Exodus 3.1-6

It all started when he turned aside. Moses, it appeared, had been contentedly looking after his father-in-law's sheep since he fled Egypt years before. His extraordinary existence in the Pharaoh's palace had been replaced with an ordinary existence, shaped by little more remarkable than finding the next grazing patch for his father-in-law's sheep. But when he turned aside, his life turned upside down. Of course, we can't help wondering whether he arrived by accident at Mount Horeb, the mountain of God, or whether he had set his path towards Mount Horeb in the hope that he might encounter God. As with so many of the biblical stories, we are left with as many questions as answers, but whatever he intended when he brought his flock close to Mount Horeb, it was Moses' willingness to turn aside when he saw the bush burning which transformed his life.

The Hebrew word, translated 'turn aside', even more than its English translation has the sense of stepping off a pre-determined path and it is this that seems so important in this story. It was Moses' willingness to change his plan and to step off the path that he was following for this whole event to happen. In this instance, Moses' predetermined path was finding the next patch of grass for his father-in-law's sheep. In our high-octane, high-performance culture this may seem a benign, gently pastoral way of life. In reality it was the opposite. Grazing sheep in what is effectively desert territory is a desperate task, with no guarantees of success. Add to this the wild animals who would stalk the flock ready to pluck off a sheep should the shepherd's attention be caught for a moment and Moses' life begins to feel much more pressured and urgent. For him turning aside could have meant the loss of one or more of his father-in-law's sheep.

In comparison our inability to turn aside may feel a little feeble, though nonetheless real. We spend such a lot

of our lives trying to keep 'on track' whatever we mean by this. So often my own life involves running constantly from one thing to the next with my eye so fixed on the next task (for which I'm often late) that I wonder whether I would notice if the equivalent of a burning bush lit up in my life. And if I did notice, would I allow myself the time to turn aside and investigate, or would I, instead mark it down on my to-do list as something to come back and explore more deeply when I've got a minute?

Turning aside seems to require at least two key characteristics: curiosity and the willingness to take time to explore. Curiosity is not often held up as a spiritual virtue. As a child, I was encouraged to mind my own business and instructed not to fiddle. Now I am a parent myself I understand this instruction all too well, but a child's curiosity seems to me to be a vital part of a healthy spirituality. Good answers are, of course, very important for Christian faith but at least as important, if not more so, is the ability to ask good questions. The problem is that many of us, as adults, are simply not curious enough. We've learnt the childhood lesson well and mind our own business – or is that busyness? As a result we no longer explore with either our fingers or our minds.

Moses' inner conversation with himself (which is again more vivid in Hebrew than can be expressed in English and is something along the lines of 'Let me turn aside and ...') suggests a lively curiosity that led him to want to know more. He was intrigued and followed his instinct to see more.

This, of course, is closely connected to the second characteristic needed for turning aside: the willingness to take time to explore. Busyness can so often prevent us from doing something only on the off chance that it might produce something. Before we begin, we want to be assured of results, to be confident that the time we take out will

produce fruit and be worth the time we spend on it. The problem is that God isn't like that. God doesn't sign on the dotted line to give guaranteed satisfaction at a pre-selected and pre-determined time before engaging with the world. Instead God gives a hint here, a suggestion there or a glimmer on the horizon. Busy people are all too likely to miss God's presence because we do not have the leisure to follow up the hints, suggestions and glimmers on the off chance that occasionally, like Moses, we might encounter the living God.

Sometimes it all begins when we turn aside – the question is whether we have the curiosity and are prepared to take the time out to do so.



2 And then living with the consequences

Exodus 3.7–11 Then the LORD said, 'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.' But Moses said ...

For further reading: *Exodus 3.7–4.13*

Any encounter with God should come with a health warning. Encounters with God are accompanied with life-

changing consequences. Moses certainly seemed to regret the consequences of his encounter with God – if not the encounter itself – almost immediately. This is because, as is so often the case with encounters with God, God did not reveal himself to Moses simply so that Moses could enjoy the encounter, or so that he could feel better about his spiritual journey, but so that Moses could do what God asked him to.

One of the features that interests me about modern discussions about spirituality and mysticism is that sometimes – often even – what we might call religious experiences are perceived as being for their own sake: to help us along in our spiritual journey or to teach us more about God. It is hard, however, to think of any encounter with God in the Old or New Testaments that is not accompanied with the command to do something: Elijah's encounter with 'the still small voice' on Mount Horeb sent him to anoint new kings; Isaiah's great vision in the temple in Isaiah 6 comes with the command to proclaim God's word to a people who would not listen; Ezekiel's vision of God's chariot in Ezekiel 1 set the scene for Ezekiel being sent as prophet to the people in Exile. For many people today the purpose of encountering God is their own spiritual journey; for the biblical writers the purpose of encountering God is mission, by which I mean being sent out to do God's will in the world. People who have a lively spiritual life should expect to have a correspondingly lively life of mission in the world; you can't have one without the other. Moses discovered this to his cost. What began as turning aside out of curiosity, ended as being sent on the most challenging mission conceivable: to free God's people from slavery.

It is easy to believe that great biblical heroes are somehow more prepared for God's call than we are; that where we stumble, hesitate and procrastinate, they leap in with

guts and enthusiasm. In all honesty we can only believe this if we don't read the texts too carefully. The biblical heroes are easily as reluctant as we are to be involved with God's mission in the world and none more so than Moses. The opening of verse 11, 'But Moses said ...', opens up a section in which Moses objects to God's call. He begins by asking who he is to be called to this: 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?' Exodus 3.11; moving swiftly on to who he should say God is: 'If I come to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your ancestors has sent me to you," and they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them?' 3.13. From there Moses looks at worst case scenarios: 'But suppose they do not believe me or listen to me' 4.1; and his own inabilities: 'O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue' 4.10. Finally he gets to his real point: 'O my Lord, please send someone else' 4.13.

The point is that although to us Moses is a great leader, to him he was simply an ordinary person about his ordinary life who was suddenly called to something so extraordinary that he found it hard to comprehend it. What we notice in Moses' grand argument with God about why he really shouldn't have chosen him for the task, is God's infinite patience and reassurance. Over and over again, God assures Moses that he will be with him to provide all the extraordinary features that are needed. God makes clear in the face of Moses' objections that he doesn't need to be well known or a brilliant theologian able to describe in detail who God is. He doesn't need to be an optimist believing that it will all go well, or a good communicator. He doesn't even need, it appears, to be all that willing. All God expects is that Moses goes to do what God requests. God still calls us as we are to provide

the ordinary to his extraordinary and is still, I imagine, as frustrated by our attempts to point to all the people who would be better at it than we would be. God still calls us in all our ordinariness, all we have to do is go ... when we do we discover that God's promise to Moses remains and that, wherever we go, he is with us.



3 You cannot be serious!

Jonah 1.1-3 Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, 'Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.' But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.

For further reading: Jonah 1.4-17 and chapters 3-4

One of the glories of deciding to choose to look at the 'ordinary' people of the Bible is the almost unlimited choice that this presents. The Bible is stuffed with stories of ordinary people, doing ordinary things until God breaks in to call them into extraordinariness. So why choose Jonah? Surely he was a prophet already, so not strictly 'ordinary'? I would argue that while his job may not have been ordinary he himself, as a person, was gloriously ordinary, with ordinary responses, reactions and grumbles.

Jonah turned aside but not in the way that Moses did. Jonah's turning aside took an entirely new direction (literally!). Jonah has to be one of the most comic books of the Bible, a comedy that begins even in its first three verses. This is even more vivid in the Hebrew than in English, where the word of the Lord came to Jonah and

said, 'Arise, go to Nineveh.' So Jonah arose ... and went to Tarshish. No one is quite clear where Tarshish is but the one thing that scholars are agreed upon is that it is in the opposite direction to Nineveh. Jonah half obeyed God in that he arose and went, the only problem is that he didn't quite go where he was meant to go! Jonah certainly turned aside but this time he turned aside to run in the opposite direction.

It seems as though Jonah is all too aware of the consequences of encountering God, and thought that he would cut these short by eluding God's notice. Again the Hebrew seems to stress this by saying that Jonah went to Tarshish 'away from the face of the Lord'. The implication seems to be that God is looking from Jonah to Nineveh, therefore if Jonah scarpered to Tarshish God might be so busy looking at Nineveh he wouldn't notice that Jonah had gone. Jonah was playing hide and seek with God but one of the many points of this story is that God is not such a local God that you can escape his gaze. Wherever we go, God is there (as the Psalmist who observed in Psalm 139: 'If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there'). In other words there is no getting away from God.

The story of Jonah is the antidote to any fear that we might have somehow missed the moment – the one moment – when God wanted to speak to us, to which I referred to at the start of this chapter. There is, in fact, no need to ask the question of what might have happened if I had turned aside at this moment, or had the time to encounter God properly on that occasion. While it is entirely possible that we can and do miss glimmers of God's presence in our world, the people who lose out when we miss these glimmers are ourselves. The story of Jonah is a story that reminds us that God doesn't give up all that easily.

EVERYDAY GOD

This is a truth that runs as a strand through the many stories of people's calling to ordination that I have heard during twelve years of teaching in theological colleges. Over and over again, I have heard people describing that un-scratchable itch, or that unavoidable sense of calling that eventually and inexorably brings them to the point of ordination. Of course vocations are not just to ordination but to all aspects of our lives: to marriage or singleness; to having or not having children; to the work we do; to the places we live; to the communities we serve; to the churches in which we worship and the various and varying ministries to which we are called.

Whatever our vocation, the one marker of genuineness is that the sense of calling will simply not go away. So if you really want to test a vocation, whatever it is to, then fight it. Fight it with all that you have. Be like Jonah and run as far in the opposite direction as fast as you can – and you can be sure that if your calling is true, God will find you there and draw you back.

Jonah is probably the most reluctant of all reluctant servants of God. He makes Moses' response to God at the burning bush look positively enthusiastic. One of the reasons I love him so much as a character is that he is in my mind a cross between John McEnroe (he who used to throw his tennis racket to the ground while shouting 'you cannot be serious!') and Eeyore, from the Winnie the Pooh stories, who is depressive and never expects anything good anyway. Jonah reminds us powerfully that for some crazy reason, despite the fact that we are often a hindrance rather than a help, God wants to include us in his mission and message of love.

Jonah also reminds us that the success of that mission is more down to God than to us. Jonah was not only reluctant, but cursory (his message was simply: 'Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!' Jonah 3.4). He

was also grumpy and angry with God when God did in fact forgive the people of Nineveh (Jonah 3.10—4.1). Despite Jonah, however, God's message transformed the people of Nineveh. This does not give us an excuse to be reluctant, cursory and grumpy in our vocations but it does reassure us that God can and does act despite us, as well as through us.

Jonah's turning aside took a very different form to Moses', he was far from a willing participant in God's plan for Nineveh. His responses to God's call are not what you might term exemplary but they are recognizable and understandable. Jonah's response to God is in many ways ordinary – in that he is not the only person to respond so badly to God's call – but despite him and through him the people of Nineveh were, the story tells us, transformed.



4 Distracted by much ministry?

Luke 10.38–42 Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.' But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.'

While we are on the subject of people who are not good at turning aside, we should turn our gaze to Martha. Martha is, on the surface, a perfect example of someone who failed to turn aside from her ‘many tasks’ to take the time to sit and to listen. The way in which the passage is translated in most of the modern translations suggests a slightly fussy woman who simply can’t leave alone her ‘many tasks’ (New Revised Standard Version) or ‘all the serving’ (New Jerusalem Bible) or ‘all the preparations’ (New International Version).

My mental (entirely historically inaccurate) image of her is of a harassed looking middle-aged woman, wearing an apron, with hair descending from an untidy bun. This mental image may or may not have been influenced by the numerous talks and sermons I’ve heard which seem to assume that Martha’s major crime here is that she has an over obsession with housework and wanting everything ‘just so’; whereas if she had been more properly in touch with her spirituality she would have been able to stop fussing around her inconsequential tasks and to take time to listen to Jesus. In other words if she had been able to be drawn less into the ordinary things of life and to have taken time out of her humdrum concerns, then she might have been able to encounter and learn from Jesus.

It probably won’t come as much of a surprise to anyone to discover that I view this passage somewhat differently. Not because I am a fan of housework— quite the opposite in fact – but because I feel that Martha is often viewed too harshly in interpretations of this story. The first point to notice is that it isn’t Martha who is acting unusually, but Mary. The description of Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus is a description that suggests that Mary is adopting the attitude of a disciple to her Rabbi. The disciples of Rabbis gathered around their feet to listen, learn and discuss what they heard. In the world that Mary and

Martha inhabited this would have been shocking and revolutionary, women would have never dreamt of even sitting down in the company of men who were not related to them, let alone sitting in the posture of one who is a disciple.

What Martha missed here was a rare opportunity to overthrow the expectations of her gender and to sit and learn from Jesus. The reason she didn't immediately sit down when Jesus arrived was probably because it never occurred to her that she could. This may have been due to her busyness or it may have been due to cultural norms. Either way the story reminds us that we should not become so bound up with the tasks before us nor indeed with what we know to be the right thing to do, that we miss the revolutionary presence of Jesus gently reminding us that our to-do lists and our etiquette are as nothing compared with the chance of sitting at his feet for a while. As a result of her many preoccupations, Martha risked missing her own extraordinary encounter with Jesus.

So what was she preoccupied with? The answer is almost certainly with preparing food for the sudden influx of guests into their house, and in this the modern translations are correct to render the verse as 'many tasks', 'all the serving' or 'all the preparations'. It is easy to fall into the trap, however, of assuming that where Martha went wrong was that she was concerned with inconsequential tasks. Apart from the fact that the feeding of hungry guests is hugely important (especially in a culture which places as much emphasis on hospitality as first-century Judaism does), this seems to misunderstand what is going on here.

One of the intriguing features of the Greek of this passage is that the word translated as 'tasks' 'serving' or 'preparations' is elsewhere translated as 'ministry' or 'service'. If we were to render this verse as 'Martha was

distracted by much ministry', the whole story gains a different perspective. Martha wasn't distracted with irrelevant minutiae so much as with fulfilling her calling; and Martha's 'tasks' were ministry in that she was engaging in those things which were her particular responsibility and to which she had been called. What she was doing was not inconsequential. It was essential, but nevertheless she allowed what she was doing to distract her from the one necessary thing of sitting at Jesus' feet.

Here we encounter a vital distinction between fully engaging in the ordinary tasks to which we are called in the expectation that there we can meet God and between becoming so distracted by those tasks that we risk missing the unexpected encounters God places on our path. It isn't what we do that affects this, but how we do it.



5 Come and See

John 1.43-46 The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.' Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.' Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.'

For further reading: John 1.35-51

One of the legendary sayings in my family is attributed to my Grandad who is said to have declared in the face of anything new: 'I don't like that, what is it?' In my more

irreverent moments I have wondered whether we could work it into church services as a liturgical response to suggestions of change. What it expresses so well is the natural human suspicion of things we don't know, or things that fall outside the parameters of what we are comfortable with or know to be true.

Nathanael's response to Philip in John 1.46 falls very close to this kind of saying. Nathanael knows it to be a self-evident truth that nothing and no one good comes from Nazareth. It is interesting to ask why he might think that. What was so bad about Nazareth? Nathanael's saying trips off his lips, a little like my Grandad's used to trip off his; this is no new prejudice but a well ingrained one. The problem is that it is hard for those of us who know nothing of the basis of Nathanael's dislike to know where it came from. There are two main options. One is that since Nathanael came from Cana (as we discover in John 21.2), a neighbouring village to Nazareth, there might have been a historic enmity between the two. The problem is that if there was, this is the only evidence for it.

A second possibility is that Nazareth, like the whole of Galilee, was seen as an inadequate origin for the Messiah who was thought to come from Judaea, the southern kingdom, and specifically from Bethlehem. It is worth remembering that Galilee in the north had only relatively recently become part of the Jewish nation again. After the northern kingdom fell in 722 BC, the Assyrians mixed up the population and for all intents and purposes the northern kingdom as it had existed before then came to an end, but during the period of the Maccabees (late 2nd century BC) Galilee was brought back into the Jewish nation. As a result Jews from Judaea, which had always been Jewish, regarded Galilee suspiciously and certainly not as the place that the Messiah would come from. Of course the

problem with this is that Nathanael was also from Galilee. If this is what he meant there might have been certain sarcasm behind his question.

As with so many of these issues we will probably never know what Nathanael had against Nazareth; the real point of the story is what happened next. Nathanael expressed a view steeped in prejudice (whether that of his own or one that was widely held) and Philip simply responded 'Come and see'. Philip's invitation to Nathanael was to leave behind the track upon which he was set and to look again at what he knew to be true. Of course the outcome was an encounter with Jesus, where Nathanael realized not only that something good could indeed come out of Nazareth but that it had in the person of Jesus.

This passage illustrates that it is not just a lack of curiosity, nor indeed extreme busyness, nor even, as with Jonah, an unwillingness to do what God has asked, that prevents us from turning aside. Sometimes it is prejudice. Or to put it more gently, knowing already that something is the case so that we do not need to investigate further. So often our minds are so firmly set on a certain course that we simply cannot see beyond it. We do not intend to be closed minded, we simply do not expect to find anything good in a certain place, and so we don't. On occasions like this, we need someone like Philip to challenge us to think again, to look beyond what we know to be true and to see it with fresh eyes.

Sometimes turning aside comes naturally but sometimes we need help. Sometimes we need the intervention of someone like Philip who is able to come alongside us and suggest that we might 'come and see' before we decide too firmly that what is over there simply cannot be of God. Indeed the challenge of faithful Christian living is being open to the 'Philips' we meet along the way who invite us to turn aside and to 'come and see'. The 'Philips'

we meet along the way may not always be right but if we decide that before going to see, we risk missing an encounter with the one who knows everything about us.



6 Oi! You!

Acts 9.1–5 Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ He asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ The reply came, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.’

For further reading: Acts 9.1–22

As a parent, I have learnt a lot about repeating myself. The conversation often goes: ‘Mum, can I have ...’ (fill in the blank as appropriate) to which I sometimes – though not always – reply: ‘No.’ Five minutes later the request comes again: ‘Mum, can I have ...’ or if they are working together as a team, my other daughter will come: ‘Mum, can I have ...’ On a bad day this goes on and on, until I pop and the shouting starts, to which my daughters give the affronted and slightly outraged response: ‘I only asked.’ Sometimes in the Bible we get a glimpse of the moment when God’s shouting begins. The case of Paul on the road to Damascus is, of course, an example not

of God being asked something but asking. Here God attempts to catch Paul's attention, so that he can realize who Jesus of Nazareth really was and then be sent out to proclaim it to the ends of the earth.

I often wonder whether Paul's experience on the road to Damascus is the first time that God has addressed Paul, or whether it was the culmination of a long series of attempts to speak to him which eventually ends in shouting. It is possible that this is the first time God spoke to Paul and, knowing what kind of person he was, decided that it was only the loud, shouting approach that could break through into Paul's consciousness, with the divine equivalent of 'Oi! You!' Either way, God certainly grabbed Paul's attention, this time.

It would have been hard not to with such a dramatic intervention. Here again, as in the case of Jonah, God demonstrates that when necessary, when we have been avoiding the burning bush moment for long enough, God can and will break in dramatically, so that there can be no doubt at all about what is meant. Most of us are much more subtle than Jonah in avoiding God's call. We don't board a ship and sail to the furthest ocean; we simply – and often politely – look in the opposite direction. In all fairness the reason for this is often not deliberate but simply because we aren't sure that we did in fact hear God's voice. One of the most common conversations I have with people about where God wants them to go next is framed around the question of 'How do I know what God wants?' Quite frankly a few burning bushes, flashing lights and booming voices would come in handy from time to time as we seek to work out what God wants of us.

One answer to this conundrum is to become very, very good at looking out for God. One of my favourite examples of this is of Simeon and Anna in the temple just after

ON TURNING ASIDE

Jesus was born (Luke 2.21-38). Simeon and Anna were people who watched for God's redemption. The somewhat old-fashioned word for this is 'sentinel', which was a soldier whose duty was to keep watch. Simeon and Anna, Luke tells us, were expert Sentinels and had spent many hours watching out for the coming of God's redemption. Simeon was 'righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel' (2.25); Anna had spent many, many years fasting and praying in the temple. The result is that even when God appeared in the most unexpected guise (that of an eight-day-old baby) they were able to recognize him and to give thanks for him. How did they do it? The answer is of course practice. Simeon and Anna had spent such a lot of time patiently waiting for signs of God that they recognized them as soon as they appeared.

We have two ends of the spectrum here. What you might call the easy way and the hard way. The easy way is to become so attuned to the things of God in the world around us that we rarely miss any signs of God's presence. The harder way is to wait for the divine, 'Oi! You!'; for that moment when, as Paul experienced it, God's call becomes so unavoidable that there is only one response. For all those people who worry about whether they might have accidentally overlooked God's call, the example of Paul comes as great reassurance. God can, did and does shout when necessary. Paul could, of course, have still taken no notice and gone on his way as before, as can we, but if God is really calling then we can be in no doubt at all that eventually we will know about it.



God calls. The few examples we have looked at in this chapter remind us that God calls ordinary people, in their

EVERYDAY GOD

ordinary lives, with their ordinary skills and abilities, to act extraordinarily for him. The one thing of which we can be certain is that God does call – is calling in fact; what is less certain is whether we will notice and, having noticed, whether we will find the time and courage to turn aside and listen.

It is so easy to assume that God's calling is for someone else – someone less ordinary than me; the reality is that God seems to like ordinary people, since it isn't what they did do that is important but what they will do. As I said earlier in this chapter, God's calling isn't just, or even primarily, about ordained ministry; it isn't even about the Church. It is about living out our lives in fulfillment of what God wants to happen in the world.

You can be sure, therefore, that God is calling you to something; the only question is, to what? Is it to live more responsibly day by day or to travel the globe caring for those who suffer when we don't? Is it to a deeper and more fulfilling community where you live or to up sticks and follow wherever he leads? It is worth noting that callings come at different times throughout our lives. We cannot rest on our laurels and point to that time last year (or even 10, 20, 30 years ago) when we heard God's call and turned aside. Sometimes God's call is to a life transformed (like Paul), or to a lifetime's task (like Moses and Paul), but sometimes it is to a specific, one-off task (like Jonah) or even to a momentary opportunity for learning (like Martha). God is calling all of us all of the time. The challenge we face is whether we have sufficient curiosity, time and courage to turn aside and listen to what he has to say.

The theme that has tied these accounts of differing callings together is the theme of successful or unsuccessful turning aside. What each one of us needs to find is our own method of turning aside. Giving a 'prescription' of

ON TURNING ASIDE

how to do it would be to miss the point. The ability to turn aside is more to do with mental attitude than with physical practice. Being the kind of person who notices the sunbeam on the field is about cultivating a frame of mind. Anna and Simeon had it; Jonah did not. Mary had it; Martha did not. Eventually Paul had it but it took a bright light and a voice from heaven for him to get it. For some the cultivation of such a frame of mind will arise from hours of prayer, for others it will involve nothing more than an inner shift so that they view the world differently. The key thing is not how you do it but whether you do it at all.