

“As God has called you, live up to your calling.” (v1)

There was a priest in Rome who was charged with forging 50,000 lire notes on a church printing press. He told them he was forced to do this because the congregation was not giving enough at the offertory. Ian Paisley had another way of raising money. Their weekly offering would be collected in buckets and when presenting them, Mr Paisley would look into them and if he felt it wasn't enough he said: “The Lord is not satisfied,” and the buckets would be sent round again until the Lord, or at least Mr Paisley, was satisfied.

The Church is made up of all sorts of people, and at all stages on their road of faith. Some will be growing, some perhaps losing, faith and desperately hanging on. Some are regular, some occasional attenders. Membership has been summed up in a number of ways. One priest likened church goers either to tonsils, because we're no worse off when they've gone; others were like an appendix, whom nobody noticed until they'd gone; and other were like false teeth, sometimes in and sometimes out.

Another clergyman likened church goers to bones. There were the wish bone, who wished someone else would do the work; the jaw bones, who did a lot of talking, but little else; knuckle bones who are always ready to criticize what everyone else does; and then, finally, there are the back bone, who get on with the work.

One of the duties to which every Christian is called is to witness to the gospel, both in the way we live our lives, and, when opportunity arises, to speak of our faith. It's this latter which so many find a terrible barrier – most of us haven't the confidence to speak of what we believe, either through embarrassment, or from a lack of knowledge.

Regarding our lack of confidence, we ought to remember that God has promised the Holy Spirit to guide us. We should trust that God is true to his word and do our

best rather than keep silent. Regarding the lack of knowledge, this is often expressed by a plea for help in praying, or in understanding the Bible. What is true for many Christians is that they have not matured in faith but are like children, wanting to be fed.

The difference between children and adults is marked. A child is dependent, relying on others to feed and care for it. An adult on the other hand, is much more independent, caring for him or her self; deciding what course of action to take. And yet, many adult Christians look to others to feed and sustain them.

But God has called each one of us to live up to our calling. There can be no substitute for taking our own initiative and action. If we are each to grow in faith, it is through our prayer, our Bible reading, our learning – and to do so we have to act. It's no good waiting for 'them', or the Vicar, or some other person to do something. We each have the responsibility to deepen our faith, understanding and commitment. Only then will the Church witness to the world as it is meant to do, and to get away from a dwindling company of the perplexed.

A boy found the pupa of a large moth, and it was struggling to get out. Thinking to help it, the boy split open the skin, and the moth lay on the branch with a swollen body and insignificant wings, and was unable to develop. It simply remained unformed until it dies. It was the struggle to get out of the skin which forced body fluids into the wings, so enabling the moth to fly.

I know that the above is greatly simplified view of the Church. We're not independent, but part of a fellowship, bound together through our faith, and united through the Holy Spirit. So though we each have a responsibility to grow and act, we have the encouragement and guidance of others to help us.

It is noticeable that some members of the congregation seldom come to a study group or prayer meeting, yet it is as we meet together that we find encouragement and support.

We are sad at the way people are leeching away from the Church, as year by year the number attending on a Sunday falls. We long to see things turned round but have no idea what to do.

There are no magical methods of commending the gospel, only the tried and tested ways of prayer and personal witness, and that relies upon our commitment and self-discipline. It's as we meet the risen Christ through our daily prayers and reading of the Bible, as we seek to deepen our understanding through other reading, and as we discuss what we find, that we shall see the gospel coming alive through us.

I'm told that it takes 5 years for a bamboo seed to show any growth above ground. For those five years it is establishing its roots, spreading them out so that it has a bountiful supply of nutrients for when the growth starts above ground. When that starts it can grow 90 feet in 6 weeks.

We have a responsibility to prepare ourselves, with the help and advice of others, to be able confidently to reach out to others.

A minister was appointed to a small, Congregational Chapel in the Lake District. When he arrived he found that the congregation consisted of some 15 or so elderly women, and his heart fell. Then he thought: "This is where the Lord has sent me, and these are his people." So he and they prayed together and prepared themselves together, and in time the Chapel became a flourishing congregation.

In another church, there was a small group that met every morning at 5am for prayer before the day started. The leader, an 85 year old, asked the vicar if they could use a room in the church. She explained that they met to pray for people going to work, and the needs of the day. He agreed, and the small group of six elderly women began to meet there.

The vicar was curious to know how this small group managed, so decided to pop in to see. When he arrived, he had the overwhelming feeling that he should stay. Other

people heard of the group and so it began to grow. After a while there was no room in the meeting room, so they went into the church. Today there are between 400 and 500 meeting daily to pray.