

WEEK 2

'I'm just saying you *could* be king.
You could do it!'



TO START YOU THINKING

Unafraid of fear

But Moses said, 'O Lord, please send someone else' (Exodus 4:13)

Read

Exodus 4:10-16

Interesting question: if Moses had refused the challenge to liberate his people from Egypt, would God have sent someone else?

Counterfactual histories are rather popular these days. What if Nelson had given in to his perpetual seasickness and decided a naval career was not for him? What if Hitler had been accepted by the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts instead of twice rejected? What if Edward VIII had been allowed a morganatic marriage with Mrs Simpson? What if Bertie had refused to take up the challenge of the British throne? Or taken it up, but failed to speak in public because it was such an impossible ordeal? Fascinating but frustrating questions to which we can never know the answers.

Certainly there could have been no one so uniquely placed as Moses to fulfil God's calling. A Jew who had actually been brought up in the Egyptian royal household, he had access to Pharaoh and could speak to him on his terms. An adopted Egyptian who had risked everything when he intervened to kill an oppressor, he had proved his commitment to justice and to his enslaved people. But by now Moses had found a new family and made a new life for himself in the hidden fastness of the Sinai mountains. There was no doubt that it was God who was calling – this conversation was taking place next to a burning bush after all. But Moses had run away once. Would he do so again?

Interesting that Moses' fear, like Bertie's, centred on his inability to speak: 'I have never been eloquent ... I am slow of speech and tongue.' With a bit of strange wizardry involving leprous hands and staffs turning into snakes, God had just proved that he would perform miracles on Moses' behalf, but even that was not enough. Moses knew that a great deal of persuasion and verbal authority would be needed in what he was being asked to do, and he knew he just didn't have it. In God's eyes that was not an obstacle: 'Now go; I will help you to speak and will teach you what to say.' Still Moses wavered. He simply didn't have the courage to go it alone. God, apparently a bit exasperated by then, pointed out that he didn't have to. It was all in hand. His brother Aaron was on his way, even as they spoke, ready to take the role of companion and act as his spokesperson.

I wonder if anyone who has been called to a challenging task has ever taken it up entirely without fear. I think I'd be a little worried if they had. I rather suspect that calling inevitably begins in fear and that it was always intended be so.

So perhaps we need not be so afraid of fear. If we wonder if God is calling us to do something, be it very small or very large, then the fear itself might just be an indication that we are on the right track.

It is, of course, the bravery to respond to the smaller challenges that prepares us for the larger ones. Moses may have been foolhardy in killing the Egyptian slave master, but he certainly demonstrated his courage and his willingness to put his head above the parapet for the sake of his suffering brethren.

Perhaps that too is a factor – compassion in smaller situations preparing us for empathy in larger ones. Certainly that was evident in the case of Lionel Logue, whose compassion for the tongue-tied young 'diggers' eventually gave him the ability to be of service to a king.

And as *The King's Speech* also shows us, it was Bertie's determination in overcoming his stammer (and perhaps Elizabeth's determination in finding the right help) long before the likelihood of him becoming king and certainly long before

the threat of war, that made him able to meet the great challenge when it did come.

We all have dreams of what we would like to do in life. There is nothing wrong in dreaming dreams and nothing wrong in pursuing them. They may well be part of God's plan for us. But we have to be prepared for the possibility that what God wants of us is something else entirely. And it may be that what God wants of us is not one great big thing, but lots of rather small and insignificant things. Francis de Sales, a seventeenth-century French bishop put it this way:

God requires a faithful fulfilment of the merest trifle given us to do, rather than the most ardent aspiration to things to which we are not called.¹

I have been talking up to now about 'calling', but what Bertie took on in *The King's Speech* did not present itself that way, rather as an unavoidable duty. The word 'duty' seems out of fashion these days, and carries rather unattractive connotations. Calling has a nobility about it, it implies being special, being selected. Duty however speaks more of drudgery, imposition and lack of choice. I'm not sure however that the two are really so different. Most true callings involve a good deal more drudgery than glory – as many parish priests, poets and physicists would affirm. Most duties can be avoided – as countless abandoned elderly parents and fatherless children might testify.

For Dag Hammarskjöld, the first Secretary General of the United Nations, it is the willingness to take on a duty that marks out someone with greater potential:

To let oneself be bound by a duty from the moment you see it approaching is part of the integrity that alone justifies responsibility.²

To my mind duty is even more scary than calling. For me, the calling of writing brings with it the frequent fear of rejection

slips and writer's block, but the duty of being carer to my elderly mother demands reserves of patience I constantly fear I do not have.

Still I rather suspect that in God's mind the two words are synonymous. What he wants us to do is what we ought to do. What we ought to do is what he wants us to do. A calling might yield more human glory than a duty, but in God's eyes it is the faithful fulfilling and not the end result that matters. In any case, he promises an ultimate glory far deeper and more satisfying than fickle human acclaim. And in the meanwhile I'm beginning to discover a little bit of what Thomas Merton meant when he wrote:

Duty does not have to be dull. Love can make it beautiful and fill it with life.³

Demanding Lord,

I am afraid of duties that seem unavoidable,

I am afraid of a calling that seems beyond my grasp.

I am afraid of risk, I am afraid of responsibility,

*I am afraid that I don't have either the ability or the
stamina for the job.*

*Even so, Lord, I give you permission to drag me out of my
comfort zone.*

I sign myself up to do both what I ought and what you want.

I might need a bit of help, Lord – you know that.

And so I trust you to supply it,

*both divine strengthening inside and human
companionship alongside.*

I trust it to turn up when I need it.

I trust you as God of both challenge and comfort.

Amen.