

Call and Response (Luke 13:10–17)

Heather Thomson

Over the next seven weeks, during Sarah's absence, we will be exploring the theme: 'Call and Response'. This theme emerged from conversations that Sarah had with the Benedictus Council and others, and will be addressed by a number of different speakers. Each of us has been asked to reflect on those times in our lives where we have felt led, called, prodded or pushed by God into a certain direction and how we have responded. Sharing the task of reflecting on this theme will allow the Benedictus community to get to know better, and learn from, those of us who speak as we share our stories. Hopefully, it will also prompt you to wonder, 'If I were to speak on "Call and Response", what would I say?' In that sense, we will all be considering this theme as it develops.

I will be leading off this series tonight, followed by Nikolai and Susie. Then I will speak again, in the middle of the series, to bring together themes that are emerging, and to reflect on Mary's call and response, and what it means for us to be God-bearers. Then Kerry and Charine will offer their reflections over the following two weeks. I will then wrap up in the final week, and reflect on what call and response means for a community, such as Benedictus. We will continue to put the Benedictus reflections on the website, for our mutual edification.

As we planned this series, we thought we might structure it whereby each speaker would address *three* experiences of call and response (very Trinitarian). This was to guide and focus the reflections, so that we were not tempted to tell our whole life's story, some of which are longer than others.

For those of you who do not know me, here is a brief, overall introduction. I retired in 2014 from being a full-time theologian at St Mark's National Theological Centre in Barton, which teaches its courses through Charles Sturt University. For a few years, Sarah Bachelard was a colleague of mine, in the adjoining office. Together, we taught and supervised systematic theology from the BTh through to PhD level. That is how I got to know Sarah and discovered that we are on the same wavelength when it comes to theology and its relation to life.

On the home front, I live with my husband, Robert, and we have three sons, the youngest of whom is about to turn 30, and one grandson. We also have a large extended family whose company we mostly enjoy. So that is a bit of the context from which I now speak.

My first real sense of call was to study theology. I was in my mid-twenties, living in Sydney, and already had a Social Work degree, though my heart was not really in it. This call was quite unusual at the time, and there were a number of contributing factors.

I can't remember a time when I didn't believe in God, but in my growing up, came to realise that God, and God's relation to us, was more complicated than I had first imagined. For one, the world was unfair. My family had lived in Nigeria for two years when I was 7. There were many things I loved about that experience, but we lived in the region that was soon to

become Biafra, under siege from the rest of the country, with many inhabitants dying of starvation. We returned to Australia, settled in Sydney, and watched this dreadful scenario unfold. After the Biafran war, we received a letter from one of the Nigerians who knew us, telling us of the people we knew who had survived and who had died. This letter to my parents began, 'Dear Master and Madam, I hope you have enough food for your family in Sydney'.

I knew from an early age that the world was unfair on the question of race, and that I was on the privileged side. So that raised for me theological questions about why, and what was God's part in that.

When I attended UNSW in the 1970s, I was involved in the Student Christian Movement, which had a commitment to social justice. These were heady days, as we read about the emerging liberation theologies, as well as feminist and black theologies. All these said to me that there were faults with traditional theology, which had been blind to the difference that class, gender and race made to theological perspectives.

So I was interested in all of this, but none of it would have prompted me to study theology at university level. That took something else.

It was my involvement in the Movement for the Ordination of Women (MOW) in the Anglican Church that really got me to the point of feeling 'called' to study theology. By the mid-1970s I had already had my consciousness raised, to some extent, on feminist issues, and the question was being raised about restrictions to women's leadership and ordination in the Anglican Church. Some women had approached Bishops and Synods, asking nicely if women could be ordained, but got nowhere. So we took to the streets. Our first demonstration was outside a General Synod at St Andrew's Cathedral in Sydney in 1977, which my boyfriend Robert and my parents attended, with placards calling for women's ordination. There is a photo of us at the next General Synod (1981) with placards saying, 'Equal Rites', and 'Four years on, still waiting'. How naïve was that? It took until 1992 for women finally to be ordained as priests, 15 years after our first demonstration.

What happened in that battle was that the real views held by those against women's ordination came out in the open, and they were hurtful and offensive. One of the worst was a letter published in the SMH by a priest who said: 'You might as well ordain a dog as a woman, for in both cases, their natures are unfit for this office.' This was so appalling that we laughed about it, but when we looked into each other's eyes, we knew the offense. We were not dogs. And many such views were rationalised by scriptural references.

What I couldn't work out was how the same scriptures could be interpreted so differently by people in the same church. Along with my other questions about God and the Christian tradition, this question of interpretation, or hermeneutics, is what I felt called to address by formal theological study. When my eldest two kids were at school and the youngest started preschool, I began the Bachelor of Divinity part-time at Sydney Uni.

My second call was to a deepening of the first. I remember it clearly, because I choked on it. One sunny day I was reflecting on how much I enjoyed studying theology, when I thought to myself: 'I would like to become a theologian'. This rose up from somewhere deep within. It felt so authentic and right, yet, as it reached my throat, before the words could be uttered out loud, I leant forward, coughed and choked, and swallowed the thought back down. It seemed so impossible. I couldn't see what opportunities there would be for work, and I

knew of no woman theologians in Australia. In the Sydney Anglican Church women were not allowed to teach men – their authority was restricted to other women, children and small animals. Besides, I had been a bit battered by my experiences of struggling for women’s ordination, and had internalised some of the negative attitudes. So a counter voice came to me: ‘Who do you think you are, wanting to be a theologian?’

As it turned out, the next year we moved to Canberra for Robert’s work, and I was able to continue my studies at St Mark’s. A door was opened. The time between my call to be a theologian and my actually being a full-time theologian was close to 15 years, but I needed that time for my formation, both academic and personal.

The reading for tonight spoke to me during this time of formation. I had read an Asian feminist theologian reflecting on this text.¹ She saw the woman as being bend double by the multiple oppressions that she bore. Jesus’ call to her was liberating, healing and affirming: ‘Woman, you are set free from your ailment’. The translation used by this theologian had Jesus saying: ‘Woman, arise’. I felt this was also a call to me to stand up and shake off what was holding me back, so that I could respond more fully to God’s call on my life.

My third experience of call and response was quite recent. I was happily enjoying my retirement, though starting to feel a little lost, I suppose. Then a few months ago I found myself growing in energy for Benedictus, and Sarah’s idea of a Benedictus Centre. To me, that was inspiring. Integrating the different parts of Benedictus under one roof, would be an outer expression of the inner work of the Benedictus community, that of integrity and wholeness. Further, in saying my Morning Prayer services I was struck by the words one morning: ‘Lift up your voice, fear not’. I have always struggled with confidence to speak, and here I was being called to speak again, without fear. So here I am, still discerning with Sarah what this might mean. Sarah seems to have more ideas about this than I do. I feel tonight’s bible reading speaking to me again. This time it is calling me out of my comfortable retirement: ‘Woman, arise’. There is work to be done.

I would like to make a few brief observations by way of conclusion.

1. Calls are received differently. Some we just get on with, others we choke on or protest against. Once we believe the call is authentic, our best response is to remain faithful to it, no matter how ridiculous it seems or how long it takes to fulfil. Being on the path is what matters.
2. There are often obstacles in the way of our responding, some in the outer world and some in our inner lives. We need to address these as best we can and wait on God to address those we cannot change. But we are responsible for managing what our unhealed selves may be doing to sabotage or resist our response.
3. One of Benedictus’ marks is discernment. As a community we are called to enable and support each other as we discern the authenticity of a felt call. So I pray that we might all be ‘healed from our ailments’ so that we may respond to God faithfully and wholeheartedly.

Amen.

¹ Virginia Fabella from the Philippines.