I want to speak about God’s work of vocation and calling.

Throughout my life so far, I’ve had times when I’ve had to think carefully about how God wants me to live out my life in the world.

I’ve had to think about who I am to *be* and what I am to *do*. I’ve had to balance different aspects at different times.

Today, I have a vocation to God, my wife and my children.

Martin Luther said that changing a baby’s nappy is holy work – I’ve had constant opportunity for holy work recently with our third child!

Before ordained ministry, I worked in manufacturing management where I tried to live an open Christian life and serve staff and customers.

My journey so far has made me increasingly aware of my brokenness, yet also of God’s love for me and his grace in my life.

I’ve been grateful for the church, friends and a spiritual director.

It’s been a process of becoming more fully myself and becoming a bit more Christ-like- of course there is a long way for me to go!

You too may have had times when you’ve been asking how God wants you to live out your life in the world.

The last year has been devastating. Globally 2.7 million people have died. Tens of millions of people are at risk of extreme poverty. Nearly half of the world’s workforce are at risk of losing their livelihoods.

Whatever the situation is like for you, we are all affected by the pandemic. We are also affected by our prevailing Western culture which seems to prize freedom at the expense of purpose.

We are told we are free to be whoever we want to be, or to do what we want to do, but we seem less sure of who we *are* or what we are here *for*.

The lectionary readings for the fourth Sunday of Easter help us.

One of the readings is from John’s gospel (John 10.11-18) where John reports how Jesus described himself as the Good Shepherd.

Jesus says that his vocation was to ‘lay down his life for the sheep.’ He would lay it down of his own accord in obedience to God.

The parable explains the shepherd’s beloved sheep are in danger and the shepherd will do whatever is needed.

What does this mean? It means God’s people are in danger and the vocation God gave to Jesus was to die for our sins and rise again so that we might be forgiven.

Jesus’ vocation didn’t stop there, of course. John says that through Jesus’ death and resurrection, God would increase the flock. Jesus said: ‘I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also.’

Jesus would save the people of Israel, but more than that, he would save the whole world. The Jewish Messiah would become the shepherd of the whole world because of love.

Another reading for today is from (Acts 4.5-12) where Luke reports that Jesus’ disciples were going about telling people about the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

They were saying that the resurrection of the dead had begun to happen through Jesus. About 5000 people believed and become Christians.

The religious authorities like the priests, the chief of the Temple police and the Sadducees (the aristocracy of Judaism) were angry and did not like this attempt to usurp their power, so they arrested them.

The next day the High Priest (the leader of the Israelites) questioned two of Jesus’ ordinary disciples (Peter and John) about how they managed to heal someone.

The High Priest asked: ‘By what power or what name did you do this? Peter replied: ‘It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed.’

Peter’s explanation for the power was that by invoking the name of Jesus a man was healed. Luke’s message through the book of Acts is that God’s power is at work in and through Jesus. God had vindicated his Son- Jesus rose from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Christian tradition proclaims Jesus really is the world’s true Lord. Jesus being raised from the dead was the start of God’s restoration of everything.

God loves the world so much that his plan will not be thwarted. We will face difficulties, there will be pandemics, and we will need time for lament, but Easter reminds us sin, death and evil are defeated. We are not without hope.

Jesus Christ will return and God will restore all things. The resurrection assures us of the final victory, it will come.

In the meantime, God’s usual way of working is through us – through the unique gifts, abilities and motivations we have been given, empowered by the Spirit.

God does not have to use human agency, he does work in miraculous ways, but God’s normal way of working is through us because God has made us to love one another.

Pope John Paul II said: love is the fundamental vocation of every human being.

This will be costly, but God uses our weaknesses and loves to redeem our past.

God gives us food through the vocations of farmers, bakers and lorry drivers. God creates new life through mothers and fathers.

God protects us through government. God teaches us through teachers. God provides beauty through artists. God heals through doctors and nurses.

We have a friend who used to run a restaurant but lost their job recently due to the pandemic. It’s been hard. However, he took a job as a delivery driver and became a key worker delivering vegetables to people isolating all over Sussex and Surrey.

His faith in God helped him to move from a place of despair to a place of hope because whatever good and honest job he is doing, he is able to see it as participating in God’s work.

Our vocations can be played out in paid and unpaid ways, as well as in full-time or part-time ways.

We have been contributing to the life and mission of the church in worship, time and money.

We have been playing a part by running websites, helping at food banks and campaigning for justice issues.

For most of us, vocation and calling are about living open Christian lives in the world wherever we are placed, what Barbara Brown Taylor describes as seeing yourself as God’s person in and for the world.

Some of us are suffering from grief and loss and God wants to comfort us at this time. Some of us are really stretched and others have more time to pray for the world.

I believe there may be one person whom God is calling to ordained ministry or the religious life.

Whatever it is for you, we discern in community, and we are obedient to God so that God’s glory may be seen.

Who are we? We are beloved children of God. The Shepherd lays his life down for us because of love. We are free to delight in God as God delights in us.

What are we here for? Wherever we are placed we can participate in the work of God making all things new. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead assures us this is no mistake; this is anticipating the future now.

Imagine what can happen in Sussex as we live out our lives for the glory of God. Anglican liturgy reminds us: ‘Lord send us out in the power of your Spirit to live and work to your praise and glory.’ Amen.

The Revd Dr Keir Shreeves

Further information and contacts about Vocation and Ministry can be found on our Diocesan website: <https://www.chichester.anglican.org/vocation-and-ministry/>