

25th July 2023

Long

“Then I said, ‘For how long, Lord?’”

Bible, *Isaiah 6:11*

As part of a Homiletics course in Divinity College, I was assigned a speech therapist to help improve my preaching skills. She asked me to choose a Bible passage and read it as if I was doing so in church. I chose the first few verses of Isaiah 6, the great commission of the prophet, when he hears the call of God and commits himself to a life of service. It's arguably one of the greatest dedications of faith the Bible contains. At the *denouement*, as I saw it – “Here am I! Send me!” – I stopped. But I was responded to by an admonition, “Go on, Mr Gordon. Go on! You're not finished yet.” And I was encouraged to continue, till I came to the verse quoted above. After Isaiah's offering of service, and his Lord's definition of what that service might contain, the prophet asks, “For how long?” My voice-coach was right. Affirmation and dedication in service is one thing. But an on-going commitment to the task – without knowing “how long?” – is quite another.

It's a question I've asked many times during my ministry, and one which *should* be asked regularly in all avenues of service. Might we be trapped in a situation and a commitment “for too long”? Have we taken something on but don't see our commitment through long enough? Are we too familiar with patterns and people that we fail to see possibilities of doing things differently? Do we keep on going when we are “beyond our sell-by date”, such that the task is doing us more harm than good.

Isaiah wasn't looking for an easy life, or trying to do a deal with God. He simply approached a call to service with realism, asking what this service business might contain. But he also needed to ask, what if it doesn't work? What if the people don't listen? What if I feel I'm failing? God doesn't criticise him for his question. He simply replies with equal realism: You'll go on as long as you need to go on. But if you and I work on it together, you'll know, with me, when “how long” is “long enough”.

Let's keep saying “yes” to the call to service. And let's *keep* asking “how long?” So that, together with God, we can come to understand what's right, and what's wrong, *and* the “how long” of our service.

A prayer for today

“Here I am, send me,” we say. And you say, “Trust me to show you for how long.” Amen