

some thoughts on ambition

'When I was about seven, I had a notebook at school, and I would write poems and stories in it and illustrate them....I had an acronym, which was like magic: IWBF – I Will Be Famous... Oh – I can't believe I told you!'

A long-held secret: not sex, lies or videotapes - but ambition. It seems that for many women the decision to pursue an interest is reconsidered repeatedly and often abandoned. And for many women, the idea of 'ambition' necessarily implies egotism, selfishness and using others for one's own ends. Men, on the other hand, consider ambition a necessary and desirable part of their lives – though Christian men may qualify it as 'godly' ambition, or call it something else. Why might this be?

What is ambition? Ambition consists of two things: using a special skill or accomplishment, and an expectation of achievement or approval. You can have a dream, but it may remain that, just a dream. Ambition implies that the dream is accomplished. And doing something, not just for the thing itself, but for some kind of recognition.

Both men and women want to acquire skills and want to receive affirmation for accomplishments. Yet often, when they achieve something, women attribute their success to luck rather than to their abilities. Many women dislike the whole idea of ambition and are quite ambivalent about it.

The answer, suggests a recent article in the *Harvard Business Review*, is that many women are still conditioned by the idea that pursuing one's own goals is only acceptable if one has first satisfied the needs of others. Otherwise, to pursue one's own goals in life seems selfish – and is perceived that way by others. Women receive mixed messages. And 'How can you go back to work when you should be there for your children?' often takes precedence over 'You really should make the most of your talents.' In their twenties and thirties, many women have to decide whether to hold onto their earlier ambitions or to modify them. Women are more likely than men to conclude that their goals aren't rewarding enough to justify the effort required to reach them – so they abandon the ambitions.

So much for women in general, but for Christian women, 'ambition' is even more confusing. Can one be a good priest, a good minister, a good leader - and a good mother? For many women, this is a painful dilemma, both within themselves, and as they are perceived by others. And it's compounded by the Christian model of leadership, which stresses servant leadership: leadership as service not status, humility not ego, and the beneficiaries of leadership being others, not oneself.

Matthew 20: 20-28 is one classic passage on ambition, yet it puts women – or one particular woman - in a very bad light! The mother of the sons of Zebedee (James and John) asks Jesus that her two sons can have places at Jesus' right hand and his left in the kingdom. Jesus' response: 'You do not know what you are asking'. And he goes on to speak about how service rather than status should be the hallmark of his disciples.

One could see this mother's desire as an expression of a kind of ambition to which I think women sometimes succumb: channelling their ambition through their children rather than expressing it for themselves. But my commentary on Matthew has a different explanation, that Matthew 'softens' the objectionable character of the request by making the mother responsible, rather than the sons themselves, as is the case in the Mark, the earlier gospel. However, as a classic

example of 'selfish ambition' it may make women even more wary of anything which could be construed as 'ambition'.

The apostle Paul gives us an interesting take on ambition in his letter to the Romans. He writes (Romans 15:20-21):

'Thus I make it my ambition to proclaim the good news, not where Christ has been named, so that I do not build on someone else's foundation, but as it is written, "Those who have never been told of him shall see, and those who have never heard of him shall understand."'

Does this help to solve the riddle of ambition? Paul did not want to build on someone else's foundation, because his calling was to plant seeds, to lay foundations, to found new churches. Paul is passionately ambitious, not for himself, but for Christ, using all the gifts God has given him. *Godly* ambition is completely appropriate.

And finally – if we are to be ambitious, let's ensure we channel our ambition into something worthwhile. An article written a few years ago challenges the focus of our ambition:

'Today bright women in our churches pour their lives into trivia, partly because they are uneasy about getting involved in significant big issues, lest they usurp the prerogatives of men. Waiting for clarification on what Paul "gives permission" to do instead of "attempting great things for God and expecting great things from God" (William Carey), they tiptoe around stirring messes of pottage... We mothers are called to be ambassadors of this good news, not called to Tupperware parties.' (Miriam Adeney)

Many women develop a new energy later in life, and this may be a time when we find it easier to acknowledge and achieve our ambitions. In the meantime, we may need to work harder at identifying our gifts and talents, finding out where to channel them, even blowing our own trumpets – and listening harder to God than to the voices of challenge around us and doubt within us.

Christ, whose insistent call
disturbs our settled lives,
give us discernment to hear your word,
grace to relinquish our tasks,
and courage to follow empty-handed
wherever you may lead;
that the voice of your gospel
may reach to the ends of the earth.
Amen
(Janet Morley, Collect for St Andrew's Day)

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