

STARTING WELL

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A friend told me recently that he'd been appointed to a new post and so I lent him *Leaving Well: Exploring Aspects of Moving from One Ministry to Another* ([Grove Book L17](#)). On returning it he asked, with a twinkle in his eye, 'Is there a Starting Well too?' His innocent question got me thinking... and now I can say 'Yes' to him.

Considering how Jesus' public ministry began, I want to suggest that there are things here which are well worth reflecting on when beginning a new role either as a lay or ordained church leader. (I write as an ordained Anglican priest but have attempted to identify principles that might apply across denominational boundaries and to both ordained and lay leaders in our churches.) I then more briefly look at some other ideas which are also worth bearing in mind when seeking to 'Start Well'.

HOW DID JESUS' PUBLIC MINISTRY BEGIN?

- In Luke 3:21ff we read of Jesus' baptism. Luke writes that as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. A voice from heaven is heard, declaring that this is God's own Son. 'You are my Son and with you I am well pleased.'

Jesus knew clearly who he was and this heavenly affirmation must have given him huge confidence as his public ministry began.

- After this affirmation and his Father's evident delight in him, Jesus, led by the Spirit (Luke 4:1) withdraws to the desert. He stays there for forty



days and nights, fasts and, presumably, prayers. In his solitude, he experiences grave temptation. We note in passing that Luke 4:13 says that when the devil had finished all this tempting, he left (Jesus) until an opportune time.

Jesus spent a significant time alone with his Father before his new ministry began. He also experienced temptation, not least about his 'sonship' and his Father's purpose.

- Jesus returns to Galilee and, empowered by the Spirit, goes to the synagogue in Nazareth, where he stands up to read from the prophet Isaiah. Having done so, he makes clear to all who are listening that 'today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing' (Luke 4:22).

It could be argued that in Jesus' first recorded piece of 'public teaching' in Luke's gospel, he tries to sum up the essence of his ministry and calling. He is effectively saying **this** is why I believe I'm here; **this** is my purpose.

- As chapter 4 continues we see Jesus 'getting stuck into' his ministry. Crowds gather, people are furious and he is driven out of town (4:28), but in the face of opposition, he walks through the crowd and goes on his way (4:30). Jesus was not deterred from his mission by those who opposed him.
- He is true to his understanding of his call. He releases a demon from a man who is possessed (4:33-35 compare with end of 4:18) and heals Simon's mother-in-law and many others (4:38-41). He spends time in prayer, seeking to understand his Father's good and perfect will, and despite the fact that there are many people in need whose lives he must have known he could touch, and who appear to long to want him to stay (end of verse 42), he is clear that he must go.

He is not distracted from what he senses is his core purpose; 'I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent' (4:43).

Jesus was resolute and single minded about what he was called to do.

Although there were plenty of opportunities for Jesus to do things which might have been 'good' and 'worthwhile' in and of themselves, he knew that they would have distracted him from his fundamental calling.

- In Luke 5:1-11 we find Jesus at Lake Gennesaret teaching the crowds. He meets Simon Peter and his companions and calls them to join him; from now on I will make you catch people (5:10).

Later others join them and Jesus begins to shape this small group of twelve into an effective team to share in the work.

Although they made many mistakes, Jesus' team was so effective that eventually the good news of Jesus had been spread around most of the then known world.

WHAT MIGHT WE LEARN FROM THE WAY JESUS BEGAN HIS MINISTRY?

Perhaps the most important thing is to try to take a significant amount of time 'away' to be with God. This might take the form of a led retreat, time with a Spiritual Director/Soul Friend, a few days of solitude or something similar. Although the practical aspects of moving house, unpacking, and spending time with family and friends will all be important, it is crucial not to neglect this aspect to 'starting well'.

Time 'away' will hopefully:

- **Enable us to feel more secure in our relationship with God,** and in prayer seek the help of the Holy Spirit in equipping us for the ministry that lies ahead; just as Jesus did.

- **Help us to be clear about God's particular call on us for this new ministry.** Whilst we may be clear that God called us in the past to a lifetime of service as, say, an Evangelist, Teacher or whatever, it is likely that he has some particular purpose in calling us to this particular role at this particular time. As a new ministry begins, spend time seeking clarity from God about this, just as Jesus did. Ask yourself, under God, what is my purpose here? What does he want me to do, to be, to become?

- **Encourage us to seek the Spirit's protection.** New beginnings, though exciting, can also be times when we are vulnerable. Just like Jesus, we need to be strong to resist temptation – not least the temptation to doubt his new call or doubt our ability, with the Spirit's help, to be obedient and faithful to it.

- **Clarify what God wants us to have at the heart of our new ministry.** There are always huge demands on a new minister. Many people will want to meet him or her and have high, and often unrealistic, expectations too. It will be impossible to meet them all. Being clear about what God wants our priorities to be will be helpful in discerning whether to say 'yes' or 'no'. Jesus did it, so should we. And once God has made clear to us what he wants our priorities to be, we **then** need to be obedient and focused on them; as Jesus was.

- **Prepare us for possible times of doubt or difficulty.** Jesus was very conscious at his baptism that he was loved by his heavenly Father who delighted in him. Though very aware of those who opposed him throughout his ministry, he was not swayed or distracted from his core purpose.

In the first few months of a new ministry, most new ministers experience a 'honeymoon period' in which it appears they can do no wrong. Sooner or later, things change, and sometimes it can feel as though they can do nothing right!

Most of us are 'wired' to be sensitive to criticism and one of the worst aspects of this for a minister in a new role is the sense that we somehow are a disappointment to our congregations. Being clear about what the Lord requires and expects of us will help if this happens to us.

- **Provide us with an opportunity to consider those with whom we are called to work** and/or identify those who may have the potential to do so. In Anglican churches, there should be two church wardens and perhaps others (readers, lay ministers etc.) who are already in post. In theory such people could provide us with a potential team. In practice, they may not be suitably gifted or called. But the bottom line is, Jesus built a team to share the work, and we should aim to do this too.

SOME OTHER ASPECTS TO STARTING WELL

- It has been suggested that a new minister should be cautious about making significant changes during the first year. Others say that the more time goes on, the harder it becomes to bring about effective change. Some of the material covered above, not least about priorities, may help in seeking to discern what is right, as will the wisdom and discernment of the 'embryonic team'.
- The importance of building good relationships and building trust cannot be overemphasised. Living with openness, transparency and integrity, as Jesus consistently did, will enable this to happen much more quickly.
- Some particular pitfalls to avoid:
 - ⇒ Seeking to be everybody's 'saviour'. Expectations at the start of a new ministry are often sky high. Whilst many people will want to put you on a pedestal, remember you have feet of clay. Stay humble.
 - ⇒ Being critical of the past. People will naturally compare you with the previous post holder. You will be different from them (not necessarily 'better' or 'worse'). Your predecessor will also have been called by God 'for such a time as this'. Try to honour what God has done through them rather than being dismissive or critical.
 - ⇒ Creating cliques or in-crowds. It is always more difficult to lead when some people feel left out. By definition, when some people are 'on the inside', others will be 'on the outside'.
 - ⇒ Trying to do too much too soon and failing to pace oneself. I was once told; 'most people overestimate what can be done in a year and underestimate what can be done in five'. This is very wise advice which I have found to be true in my own ministry. Be patient.
 - ⇒ Whilst it's important not to keep looking back on your previous ministry as a 'golden period' (especially when the going gets tough in the new ministry) or a 'foretaste of hell' (when things are going well!), it's important to remember and apply some of the important lessons the Lord may have taught you in the past. At the same time though, just because something may have worked well say ten years ago, in a particular context, it may not necessarily be what God wants in your current context **now**.
 - ⇒ Being so enthusiastic about the exciting new ministry God has called you to that family life, prayer time and personal space and so on are neglected. Though I have left this point to the end of the list, it is by no means the least important.

The beginning of a new ministry will inevitably bring both joys and challenges. The ministry of Jesus always provides for us the model for our own ministries. My prayer is that in serving the one who himself came to serve he will generously give us grace and his Spirit's help to start, and continue well.



FOR REFLECTION

1. The article suggests that **Jesus' core purpose** could be summed up in Luke 4:18-19. What do you understand **your core purpose** to be under God? Try to set aside some time to reflect on this aspect of your calling, how you have sought to work it out over the last year or so, and how you sense God may want to use you in the coming year.
2. Spend some time looking back at how well you may have started your current or a previous ministry. What seemed to go well? What might you have done better? What have you learned about how to 'start well' (or for that matter, 'start badly') that might be helpful in your future ministry?
3. Remembering Jesus' call of the disciples very early in his ministry, think about those with whom God has called you to serve. How will you seek to encourage and use them this year? How might you develop their gifts? How might they develop yours?
4. a) If you are about to start a new ministry: What do you consider to be the most challenging aspect of 'starting well'? How might you be able to tackle it and who may be able to pray for you and support you? Seek their help as soon as you can!
b) If you started a new ministry some time ago: (see Q2 above) Think of someone in your current set up who is about to start a new ministry, or in a church relatively near you who might value your encouragement and practical support about 'starting well'. Offer to meet with them to talk, encourage and pray.
5. As you look ahead to 2019, have you, like Jesus, planned times to be alone with God? Put some specific dates in your diary.



THE ONE WHO
CALLS YOU IS
FAITHFUL AND HE
WILL DO IT.

1 THESSALONIANS 5:24

