



## God's calling

The Reverend Canon Gill Varcoe explains ...

**M**Y FIRST ENCOUNTER with God was a few months short of my 16th birthday. I was an atheist, self-sufficient; (*laughs*) can you imagine?

I didn't have a religious upbringing. It wasn't absent but it was more like, the church is there, so we'd go. We did go occasionally, and we got sent to Sunday school. This was around Windellama way, so I am a local of sorts.

I went to high school in Goulburn and by accident I found myself at a Baptist church — at a straight old-fashioned Billy Graham type, evangelistic rally. It wasn't him of course, but that type of thing. And something happened. I

encountered God, something huge. I didn't have a language for it then as I do now. I was actually pinned in my seat, I couldn't move. The evangelist came to deal with me. He must have been tired, looking back he must have been tired, so he went into his spiel like, "This is how you become a Christian, it's like this".

But he didn't ask what had happened to me, so what he was saying didn't make any sense and I didn't cooperate with him. Eventually he sent me home to read the first five chapters of St John's Gospel, which I did. I was actually a very obedient child. But at first it didn't make any sense to me at all.

### WHEN

I went home, went to sleep and woke up the next morning full of joy. That's the only way I can describe it. During that day, suddenly in the middle of the day, I thought, "I'm going to go back there tonight and I'll get off my seat and go up to the front".

And I did. That was my first really strong encounter with God — I think that was the moment of the call. We talk about 'conversion' and 'calling', but quite often it really is a call.

I became an Anglican in my thirties and then had to work out what that meant in terms of my call, how to look at what being a minister in the Anglican church might mean. I found myself in the middle of a heated conversation about whether women could be ordained or not.

This conversation had been going on for years because the Anglican church changes slowly. A change doesn't happen by somebody saying, "this is what will happen". It happens by people talking to each other, and working it through.

I was ordained as a deacon at the end of 1987 when we were still arguing about whether women could be priests. So I was a deacon for five years, and the bishop here eventually said, "OK, it doesn't look like there is any legal reason not to ordain these women as priests". That provoked a Supreme Court challenge in NSW, and an injunction was made to stop it but then the case was heard and dismissed. It became so public and there was so much public support — and shock actually that the argument was happening. I was among the first to be ordained.

I ended up in Braidwood because the Bishop was concerned about little places flourishing and the pressure on the place to just keep everything going. Too few people working too hard and of course all the difficulties that arise from people getting tired and so he sent me here to see what I could do about it.

We're part of the diocese of Canberra and Goulburn which started in Goulburn 150 years ago this year. We've got our 150th birthday, and that's nice because it coincides with Canberra's 100th as well. One of the things I am doing at the moment is coordinating some of the celebrations for our 150th.

Yeah, it's big, and there has been a bit of a focus on the cost/benefit analysis. But God doesn't! He is not interested, actually. I mean where did Jesus show up? In the backblocks and God keeps showing up in those places too.

### DID YOU LAST GO TO CHURCH?

I am really confident at the moment that God is at work. The message is: God coming into the world to help us out of a hole, and if we can grasp that He has come to help us out, and that we don't have to stay in the hole, then everything changes. And I am more sure of that now than I have ever been, having lived through periods of depression, long periods of depression with things just not making sense. And then coming into a new confidence, the reality of God and of His presence, that He loves us, He cares about us.

One of the lovely things about Jesus arriving in the backblocks is that it shows He really cares about us. On Christmas Eve here in Braidwood, the service just lends itself up for saying this. At the time I said, "Hey, look, here is Jesus showing up in a stable in Bethlehem. The angels tell the shepherds, Jesus does not show up in Jerusalem, He doesn't show up in Rome, He doesn't show up in an OK house in the middle of somewhere fancy. And saying that to the people who were there in the church — for even the Braidwood people sometimes feel we're back of nowhere — they heard that God doesn't think that. And anyway He likes back of nowhere actually — that's where His concerns lie. It was a nice moment.

You asked me about the environment. There is alliance between Christians and the environment. Lots of Christians are passionate about the whole issue around God's creation. We have got environmental protocols going on and there are focused ministers in this diocese who look at these things. The former bishop is on an international Anglican commission for the environment and there is a rector at Moruya, Linda Chapman, who has a place at Tilba which she calls an open sanctuary. It is explicitly around preservation and creation, the celebration of it, and encouraging alliances with people who are environmentalists.

Communicating this has been another matter. Some people use their faith to get what they want and they just home in on a particular bit of the Bible and say, "Ah ha! Look, God says He's giving humanity dominion over the Earth". No, no, no — read it properly. God has given us the job to care for it. You asked me when Jesus threw the money lenders out of the temple, was that an objection to what they were doing, or where they were doing it.

It's a really good question, I like that. Both, both. They were ripping off the poor for a start, and they were doing it in the name of God, which is a no-no.

Jesus was furious, yeah. He was really furious.

The Bible also tells a story about a poor widow who puts her last coins into the temple's treasury, and He comments on it. Jesus says she is giving more than the people who are giving loads and loads. People have read that as if He were approving but I am not sure He was. In that context He is also saying, 'Hey, these religious leaders are ripping off the widows and the poor!'. The Old Testament is full of God's care of those who have no-one to care for them. So Jesus runs on that sort of stuff. He really upset the establishment — it was the religious establishment that was most upset.

Here in Braidwood our regular service at St Andrews is 9 o'clock in the morning on Sunday. It's a communion service and everyone is welcome. Even those who just want to sit up the back, they are welcome and free to watch if they want. They are also really welcome to come and talk to me, I'm really, really happy to talk to them.

We've started Sunday school which is great. It was lovely last Sunday when there were eleven kids; we had a ball, the kids had fun ... when mum and dad don't wake up in time, floods of tears.

The age group for Sunday school is two to ten years old, and the school is during church. Having the kids at Sunday school gives the parents time out so they can come here and not have to attend to their children, to just hang out.

Actually, it is one of the things we've lost in our society. We don't take time out, just coming and stopping for an hour. Just stopping. It's going to be quite scary too because a lot of people live with no silence, who just don't like silence, all the time so yes, taking time out is good.

As far as Braidwood is concerned this year we will be running an 'introduction to Christianity' course, soon I hope; it's called Alpha and we will go on exploring how better to connect with the community.

I look forward to meeting you.

There are many types of bread, but this is

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