

# Shaped for Serving God

## Sermon for St Pauls – 6 Feb 2005

Somewhere along the way, I seem to have learned how to open a milk carton. You know, a milk carton, those tetra-pack cartons, this is not a naturally intuitive package. Like, it's not obvious, the first time you see one of those milk cartons, just how you're supposed to open it.

Do you remember the first time you encountered one of these Tetra-pack milk cartons. I'll bet you just manhandled the top apart until you had a big square opening. In fact, some people still open them that way.

But somewhere along the way, I was shown, or I worked out, that if you folded one side back, the side opposite the side that says "Open Other Side", if you fold it back and then squeeze, the top pops open into a neat little pouring spout. How clever.

Now this got me thinking. How many things in life have I learnt, or experienced, that shape who I am today? And maybe I am not even aware of (a) that I learnt them, and (b) that they shape who I am today.

For example, thinking about milk, many of us learned how to open a milk bottle. Anyone born after 1980 probably never learnt this skill. Milk bottles were sealed with a little soft metal cap. Now there were two ways to open a milk bottle cap.

There was the blokey method. The blokey method consisted of a deft push of the thumb into the centre of the soft metal cap. This had the effect of releasing the cap from the little groove in the bottle neck and then you could lift the whole cap off.

However, the second method, which I learned from my Mum is generally considered superior because it allows the cap to be put back on the milk bottle when the bottle was returned to the fridge. Mother's method was to place the palm flat and firmly on the top of the soft metal cap and then rotating the hand, and therefore the soft metal cap, left and right, so that the cap was released from the groove in the bottle neck and could then be lifted off, and, because it retained its perfect shape, it could be returned to the milk bottle to continue life as a milk bottle cap.

Let's do a quick poll. Who used the blokey method? And Mum's method?

Now, why is this important? Well, it's not.

It's just a small example of the sort of things we learn, that we don't think about much. And that's important. Because God is working in our lives from before the day we are born to shape us into the kinds of people he wants us to be. God is shaping us for the plan he has for our lives. God is at work in our lives, from our first day, and then every day, shaping us for the service he has in mind.

And, most of the time, we don't even notice.

When I was an undergraduate student at the University of Queensland, I concentrated on Journalism and English. In my last semester, I need just one-half subject to complete the requirements for my Bachelor of Arts degree. I looked at the lecture timetable and saw that I had a spare hour between my fourth year English and Journalism subjects on Thursday. So, with great care and attention to the subject matter of all the subjects, (not), I selected a subject that was taught in that spare hour. The only criterion that seemed important to me was that it fitted my available time.

That subject was called “Sociology of Revolutionary Movements”. I wasn’t much interested in sociology, and even less interested in revolutionary movements. I thought revolutionary movements was what happened to you after bad curry.

Actually I found “Sociology of Revolutionary Movements” more interesting than I predicted. But I saw no use for the subject. After all, I was a radio announcer. I was interested in writing and journalism. How would the sociology of revolutionary movements be useful to me?

Well, two years later I found myself led to apply for a communications position at World Vision. They were looking for a journalist with media experience, and I was qualified. Soon I was trying to understand what World Vision was doing. In particular, I began to try to understand why people were poor and how they responded to the things that caused their poverty.

To my very great surprise, I found myself going back to the sociology I had studied. Looking up the books I had read and discovering that the things I had studied were central and important for my growing understanding.

I remember thinking, How clever is God, eh? I didn’t know I would need this subject, but He did. Not only that, he made sure I had a little hole in my lecture timetable where this subject fitted perfectly.

Without my even knowing it, God was shaping me for the work he wanted for me. God was at work. He was shaping me for service.

We’ve been looking at this book by Rick Warren, “The Purpose Driven Life.” Right at the beginning of the book, Rick Warren asks, “Why on earth am I here for?” His answer is “5 things.” We are created by God to fulfil 5 purposes. These are:

1. To enjoy God, and for him to enjoy us.
2. To live as part of God’s family.
3. To become like Jesus.
4. To serve God.
5. For Mission.

Already, we have heard Ken, Brian, Peter and me talk about the first three. Enjoying God (and God enjoying us), being part of God’s family, and becoming like Jesus.

Today and next week, Ken and I are going to talk about the way that God is shaping us for service.

The first thing to say is that we are created for work. Now, this is something that Christians can easily overlook, because there is no doubt that we are saved by grace, and not by works. Our place in the Kingdom is not dependent on anything we do. Our relationship with Jesus is not determined by our work. And Paul makes this clear when he writes to the Ephesians.

Have a look at Ephesians 2:8.

EPH 2:8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - 9 not by works, so that no one can boast.

So that is absolutely clear. Salvation is a gift of grace. Amazing Grace. And we are saved through faith. Only faith. Works has nothing to do with it.

But wait, there's more. Look at the next thing Paul says. Verse 10.

10 For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

How many times have you heard someone quote verses 8 and 9 and overlook that IMMEDIATELY Paul make this significant and important qualification. Yes, we are SAVED by grace and through faith, but we are CREATED to do good works.

But it's even better than that. Paul says we are God's workmanship. We are made by God. And he made us to do good works. And he prepared, in advance, these good works for us to do.

God was at work on us even before we were born. He said to the prophet Jeremiah, JER 1:5 "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart."

Just as God had a plan for Jeremiah even before he was a foetus, God had a plan for you and me from before our beginning.

We are his workmanship, created for good works, that he prepared in advance for us to do.

I can't avoid a little aside here. This little word "do" misses some of the poetry of the Greek language Paul used to write to the Christians in Ephesus. Maybe you've heard the English word "peripatetic" which means to walk around a lot.

Paul uses the original Greek word here at the end of verse 10. He says literally that God prepared these good works in advance for us to walk around doing.

Now there was a very famous Greek Philosopher who lived about 200 years before Jesus. His name was Aristotle. And he was famous for the way he taught. He taught by walking around. The Greeks described this as teaching-by-walking-around and the word in Greek was the origin of our English word *peripatetic*.

Soon enough this idea of walking-around was used to describe anyone who demonstrated

their works in action. Someone who lived out their beliefs was described as doing it by walking-around, and they would think of Aristotle, hard at work with his ideas striding left and right around the Lyceum in Athens.

So this verse 10 says *For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.* But not to DO in any kind of shoulder-shrugging way. Not lukewarm or half-hearted. Not carrying a grudge, nor doing something just out of duty.

Our work is intended to be full on. Whole of life stuff. Throw yourself into it fully. Get out there. Walk around. Show people that we are created for good works. Obvious, visible good works.

Just as Aristotle strode up and down, the perfect example of the enthusiastic whole-hearted teacher, we are shaped by God in advance to throw ourselves into active and obvious good works. When Christians are at work, the world should see MOVEMENT.

So, we are saved by grace, but we saved FOR good works. This is what Paul says. We can't say just half of it and be faithful to Scripture.

Now don't worry about this. Because God doesn't just throw us out into the world and say "Do good works." God gives us everything we need to fulfil the plan he has for us. If God wants us to do something, you can be sure he equips us fully to do it right. God shapes us for serving Him.

How does God shape us for service?

Here, Rick Warren does a clever thing. He gives us a mnemonic - a little memory aid. Rick takes the word SHAPE and says:

S is for Spiritual Gifts

H is for Heart

A is for Abilities

P is for Personality

E is for Experience <Repeat>

What good works are we shaped for? It will be some kind of work that uses our spiritual gifts. It will be some kind of work for which we have a heart, a passion. It will be some kind of work that fits our abilities—God is not going to ask us to do anything we are not *able* to do. Our good works will be something that suits our personality. And our service will give us opportunities to use our experience.

Spiritual Gifts, Heart, Abilities, Personality and Experience, this is the way God **shapes** us for service.

I was born in Parramatta, New South Wales, about three blocks from where my convict forebear, Richard, once had a Saddlers business. My father, John Morris Hunt, was an engineer. But much of Dad and Mum's life as I experienced it was centred around the

Granville Methodist Church. Dad was the Sunday School Superintendent. Mum was one of the organists. Like every child, I thought my experience was everyone's experience. Being a Christian was, for me, the most natural and normal thing in the world.

Of course, when I went to school I discovered that people's experience, of church and many other things, were a bit different to mine. Some other kids went to church, but different ones. And if there were any Jews or Muslims, they weren't at my school in the Fifties. Or, if they were, the teachers just made them line up with the Anglicans anyway. But I was serious about my religion because my family was. And like all children, I accepted the way my family behaved as if it were absolute. That's the way the world was for most in the Baby Boomer generation.

Then, Billy Graham came to town. I don't remember too much about his crusades except that they were at the Sydney Showgrounds and they were huge.

But I do remember that I followed the crowd one night down to the front to "give my life to Jesus." Was I following the herd instinct? Probably. Did I understand what I was doing? Well, I thought I did. Did I expect my life to be different after that? Yes, frankly I did. And was it? No. It was the same life. Same problems. Same struggles. Same. In fact, I wasn't yet a teenager, so life was bound to get worse.

But one thing was certain, I did want to do it. And I did say a prayer something like this one, "Jesus, I want you to be my guide for the rest of my life. I want to do whatever you want me to do." And, I think I meant it.

So what happened?

Well, I went to school. My Dad got promoted to be Queensland Manager and, when I was 15, we all moved to Brisbane. Both my parents were musical and I had learned the piano and pipe organ. One of my mates had a ukelele, so I borrowed it and learned to play it and then spent one-pound to buy one of my own. And then Dad bought me a guitar for my birthday. Folk music was big in the Sixties, and more interesting than school work, so I formed a trio and did gigs all over South-East Queensland, pretending to be the Kingston Trio.

About this time I hit Year 12. And failed. Suddenly I no idea what I was going to do.

My immediate remedy was to suggest I go jackarooing. My parents saw that jackarooing was an occupation for which I was immensely NOT gifted. And they sent me back to repeat Year 12.

Slowly the idea formed in my head that I was to be a doctor. God knows why! No, actually, God knew something altogether different. I imagine he said "Philip! A doctor? I don't think so."

Anyway, I had another great year at school. I debated. Won the public speaking competition. Took the role of the Captain in "HMS Pinafore". Crammed to do the entire secondary level music course in one year and passed. Took leadership roles in Methodist camps all over the State every school holidays.

But also, I played in the 6th Rugby Union side. There were only six sides. And only one other school, Nudgee College, had enough boys to field six sides, so we only played one game for the entire year. Nudgee College won, 76 to nil.

And I also tried to pass Chemistry again. And again failed. At the end of the year, I couldn't get into Medicine, because I needed Chemistry. Now what?

Dad took me along to the National Bank and held my hand while I applied to be a bank Johnnie.

I enjoyed just over a year in the bank, but my real life was happening elsewhere. My trio was busy every weekend. I was compering at discos, and helping to stage monthly youth rallies. Not to mention driving across Brisbane regularly to visit a very interesting female folk singer who was proving to be everything I had ever dreamt about in a girl friend.

Somewhere in the midst of this, the manager of one of the Brisbane radio stations got to know me and one day he said, "If you ever want to be in radio, let me know."

Did I want to be in radio? Now that sounded like fun.

I reckon about this time, I started to move from learning to un-learning. I remember my surprise at how really un-professional much of radio and television was in those days. Somehow the slickness of the finished product, and the enthusiasm of the voices and faces of media people had taught me something. I had learned that the media was about doing the best, about high production values, about art, about sincerity. But, as I worked in the media, I had to un-learn a lot of this. I found it full of people who led double lives. Their sincerity was entirely manufactured. What sounded like a good performance, or a good show, was the result of short-cuts, deceptions, and a lot of cut and paste.

In 1976 I got the first real inkling that maybe God had taken seriously that prayer I had prayed at the Billy Graham crusade. I had said I wanted him to guide me, that I wanted to do with my life what he wanted.

It happened like this.

I was reading the trade magazine, B&T weekly. And there was an job ad, not for a radio job, but for a charity job. World Vision was advertising for a "Communicator." One thing impressed me about their ad, and a second thing just blew me away.

The thing that impressed me was that a charity had the unusual good sense to advertise in this particular magazine. If they wanted an experienced media person, this was the ideal place to advertise. And yet, I had never before seen a non-media organisation advertise here. Clearly, whatever this World Vision place was, they seemed to know their business.

But the thing that blew me away was that the ad was like a summary of my experience. Every one of the things they wanted, I had done. I took the ad home and showed it to Judy and we agreed I should apply. It was just as if I had been shaped to fulfil this role. Now isn't that

surprising?

Well, to cut a long story short, I got the job as one of two communications officers. And I thought that maybe this was all part of some divine plan. That maybe my childish prayer had been carefully considered by a power higher than I could imagine. That someone out there really did have a plan for me.

Those first six years with World Vision were really exciting. We introduced the 40 Hour Famine and turned it into a national success. We got onto television. We developed a direct marketing strategy. World Vision became a household name.

Well after this there were many and regular examples of how God was shaping me, and then inviting me into ways of serving Him that I had not planned, but that I realised He had uniquely equipped me for.

Judy and I were both surprised to be asked to go to Hong Kong in the 1980s to develop a World Vision ministry in Hong Kong and Singapore.

Then I was invited to lead World Vision Australia and after a number of years to go to Europe and lead World Vision's ministry in the regions of the Middle East and Eastern Europe.

Later, we felt called to return to Australia for reasons of Richard's education. Nothing to do with career. But God had this in mind too. He led me through an interesting, and actually quite enjoyable time, of redirection and rethinking.

Then two years ago I believe he led me to Deakin and the student association where so much of my experience is being focussed and freed in a new way of serving.

And one other story.

God led me into radio. And he led me out. While I was working at World Vision Australia, about 15 years ago, a radio station licence here in Melbourne came up for sale. A World Vision colleague and I expressed our dream for there to be a Christian radio station in Melbourne. We had this vision of a radio station that would speak to the whole Melbourne community, Christian and non-Christian. Not radio FOR Christians, but radio BY Christians and operating with Christian values.

We wrote a business plan, but we couldn't raise the finance and the idea died. Or so it seemed. To me.

Two years ago, I was invited to join the board of Light-FM and I discovered that my dream had not died. It had been God's dream all along, and he had kept it alive through others. These days I am vice-chairman of Light-FM and through my involvement I am discovering all over again how God has shaped me for this role. What a great privilege to be a servant of a master who shapes us for the very service to which he calls us.

Why do I have this journey to talk about? Is it because I am a good Christian? I confess, I am

not. Many others pray more than I. Many others are more spiritual. Many others are more devotional. Many others are less sinful. Frankly, I reckon this journey has got nothing to do with my faithfulness.

It has to do with Jesus and His faithfulness. As I look back I see so much evidence of a higher power that shaped a child, shaped a man, and who still today shapes and leads me into the work to which he calls me.

May it be so for you too. A-men.