

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time
January 23, 2011

“Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men and women.” The call of Christ. So then, to Matthew’s Gospel. Did Peter and Andrew, James and John actually leave their nets “immediately” and follow Jesus? Not at all impossible. Not when we read a bit later that a would-be disciple who wanted time to go and bury his father was told by Jesus, “Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.” Matthew may well be suggesting the powerful attraction of Jesus, may well be hinting at the demands made by a gospel call: no delay, leave all else now.

On the other hand, it is still possible that Matthew is compressing a longer story, possible that there may have been time for a growth in attraction. We find hints of this in John’s Gospel. Remember how Andrew and John spent a day with Jesus, how Andrew then brought his brother Peter to him?

But if we are not sure how quickly each of the Twelve responded to Jesus, one element in their vocation is clear. Like Mary of Nazareth before the angel Gabriel, so the Twelve before Jesus. None of them received a script, not one was given a scenario, detailing what apostleship would bring in its train. It was only gradually, only through harsh experience, that they would learn the cost of discipleship.

What cost? Each day of your life, be ready for a cross. When invited to a dinner, always take the lowest place. Though disciples of God’s Son, you are not to be served but to serve. When slapped on one cheek, turn the other to the slapper. When you love, love especially the sinner and the outcast, the oppressed and the powerless. If hurt, forgive – not seven times but seventy times seven, without limit. Loyal though you twelve claim to be, one of you will sell his Master for silver, another will deny to a servant girl that he ever knew Jesus. And all save one will refuse to stand beneath his cross.

Nothing of this at the beginning. For Peter and the rest, nothing but a grace – an extraordinary grace – grace to say yes to a most extraordinary man. Grace to leave a job – fishing, for example, or collecting taxes – and follow this strange, attractive teacher wherever he might lead. Grace indeed. Amazing grace.

Now, let's return to today, to ourselves, to our privileges and our problems. Here we discover two facets to our calling. On the one hand, "Follow me." It is our call to be disciples. On the other hand, "I will make you fishers of men and women." It is our call to be apostles.

Disciples. "Follow me." Our original call sounded in your baptism and mine. It reminds me of Belgian Cardinal Suenens' striking declaration at the Second Vatican Council: "The greatest day in the life of a pope is not his coronation but his baptism, the day of his mission to live the Christian life in obedience to the gospel." Such is God's summons to every Christian. This is Christian discipleship at its most basic, discipleship no genuine Christian dare avoid – rich or poor, old or young, male or female, ordained or lay. To live as Jesus lived. To walk in the footsteps of the Jesus who declared to his disciples, "My food is to do the will of God who sent me and to complete God's work."

Three powerful monosyllables: Do God's will. It sounds so dull, so prosaic. And yet it is the stuff of Christian living. It is Christ's call to fidelity. Fidelity to responsibilities that stem from our baptismal covenant with God in Christ. What responsibilities? Three. 1) Love God above all else, with your whole heart and mind, all your soul and strength. 2) Love each human person, each sister and brother, like another. 3) Reverence all God's creation, earth and sea and sky and all that is in them, because each bears God's imprint, each carries a trace of the Lord who fashioned it, each reveals to me the grandeur of God, hints to me what God must be like.

Disciples indeed, we who follow in Jesus' footsteps. But more than disciples. After "Follow me" Jesus added, "And I will make you fishers of men and women." Apostles. Literal translation: men and women "sent." Sent to do what? To "complete God's work." And what is that? Vatican II put it powerfully: "It involves the renewal of the whole world. Consequently, the Church's mission is not only to bring to men and women the message of Christ and his grace, but also to penetrate and perfect the whole world with the spirit of the gospel. God intends, in Christ, to take up the whole world again and make of it a new creation, initially right here on earth."

The mission of Christians is a twin mission: to link every man, woman and child to God, *and* to shape this earthly city into a city of justice, of peace, of love. Each of you shares in that mission. The root mission that sends a Christian to sanctify the Church and reshape the world is not ordination, not a vow ceremony, not a special lay commissioning. You were sent on mission, anointed as apostles, the moment you were baptized – you and I and every Christian without exception.

As with the original apostles, so with you and me. Our Lord Jesus rarely if ever sends us forth with a script. The ways apostleship takes us, the highs and lows, the joys and sorrows, are not inscribed at our baptismal fonts. Only gradually, at times through harsh experience, will we realize what the Protestant martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “the cost of discipleship.” We can be sure of two realities only: 1) the Holy Spirit will always surprise us; 2) however startling or even crucifying the surprise, God will always be there. It’s amazing grace.

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