

# 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

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## GOSPEL MK 1:14-20

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Today's gospel reading picks up nicely from the readings on the past couple of Sundays. On the feast of the Epiphany we heard about the Zoroastrian astrologers traveling to Bethlehem. Last Sunday we heard about two disciples of John the Baptists following after Jesus and going with him to where he was then staying. Today we have Jesus walking alongside the Sea of Galilee and inviting some fishermen to leave their work and their homes in order to walk with Jesus around the countryside. The gospels smell of the *road* just like Plato's *The Odyssey* smells of the sea.

And the Jesus road show was a sociable business. He wanted people to walk with him. He called these two brothers, Simon (who would later become known as Peter) and Andrew, and then two other brothers, James and John, not for a lecture on doctrine or ethics, but for a walk- for wandering around, for what we might call a "pilgrimage"- "Come follow me". And they got up and went with Jesus. The first question that comes to mind is: why in the world would they do that? What was its purpose, its value, its contribution to society and to family and to everything else that we value? Why would these grown-up men follow after Jesus, abandoning their property and work tools- they had boats and nets- and, in the case of James and John, also leaving their father? What could make a person do such a thing?

When we read or hear this gospel, I think we romanticize it so quickly and easily- we say, “oh, yes, the disciples, they heard the voice of the Lord and left everything to follow him”. Well yes they did, but why? They didn’t know it was “the Lord”. We don’t even know if they knew Jesus of Nazareth at all. Maybe they had heard about him. Maybe they had seen him somewhere. But maybe not. What was going on inside these hardy, outdoor peasant workers that would somehow enable them to allow their lives to be turned upside down, to leave their families in a rather precarious economic situation- because there was a real economic cost for families and villages to losing men who were workers and helped to bring in the bacon- and then to go with this rather odd Rabbi who had come to Galilee saying to people that: “The time is fulfilled. God’s kingdom is arriving. Turn back and believe the good news.” What did all of that mean?

Discipleship, concretely walking with Jesus, being willing to go with him, caused tremendous upheaval in the lives of those first followers, those first men who got up and walked with him. And maybe that’s the first thing we should reflect on in terms of our own discipleship. I think that it is easy to fall into an unconscious way of thinking about “religion” and about our lives in the church as if the goal of the whole thing is to make our lives neat and easy and fulfilled, but in such a way that there isn’t much upset or change or disturbance. At some level, we all probably want this, which is why we tend so easily to domesticate Jesus and the gospel and the Church.

Over the decades I have lived in various countries, in various kinds of communities, under various ecclesiastical systems, but one of the most consistent things that I have

encountered in my own life and among all different kinds and types of Christians is the variety of ways in which we act out the willingness to accept the Christian stuff only *inasmuch as* and *to the degree that* it fits in with whatever else we may be doing. And once the Christian stuff, the “Christ stuff” begins to intrude, or to upset, or really to challenge life-styles, then often it’s back to the boats and the nets, and the walk is over.

And we know from the gospel that some of Jesus’ early disciples did exactly the same thing. When Jesus began saying weird stuff like, “I am the bread that has come down from heaven” and “whoever eats this bread will share the life of God’s new age”, some of his disciples “drew back”, John’s gospel says, “and no longer went about with him.” Jesus then turned to the Twelve, and asked them, “And do you want to go away too?” to which Peter responded, “Who can we go to? You’re the one who’s got the words of the life of the coming age! We’ve come to believe it- we’ve come to know it!- that you are God’s Holy One”. (John 6: 53-69). Somewhere on the walk, somewhere on the journey, they came to know that they couldn’t do without Jesus, regardless. . . . And if that happens to us, then we’re also ready to see the journey through, regardless. . . .

So, when I read the gospel account of the calling of the first disciples, I’m challenged to think about what a truly radical thing it was for those guys to get up, to walk away from the stability and the familiarity and the expectations of their lives, to go with Jesus without knowing who this Rabbi was or where he would lead them, and to stick with him no matter what.

This leads to the second really important thing about this calling-of-the-disciples episode. If those first followers of Jesus had seen where the journey was heading, would they have gone? If the tradition is right, many of them would end up being murdered, martyred, for their relationship to Jesus, for walking with him:

- Matthew and Thomas were speared to death,
- Andrew, Bartholomew, Philip and Peter were crucified in various creative Roman ways
- James, the son of Zebedee, had his head cut off
- James the son of Alphaeus, was stoned to death

There is a marvelous old Protestant hymn about the nature of Christian life, which goes like this:

**1. They cast their nets in Galilee  
just off the hills of brown;  
such happy, simple fisherfolk,  
before the Lord came down.**

**2. Contented, peaceful fishermen,  
before they ever knew  
the peace of God that filled their hearts  
brimful, and broke them too.**

**3. Young John who trimmed the flapping sail,  
homeless in Patmos died,  
Peter, who hauled the teeming net,  
head-down was crucified.**

**4. The peace of God, it is no peace,  
but strife closed in the sod,  
Yet let us pray for but one thing --  
the marvelous peace of God.**

If we are looking to Jesus as a way of avoiding the nastier parts of life, if we are looking to him as a kind of talisman of protection against the vicissitudes of human existence,

we may have to reconsider that. I'm not sure that discipleship ever meant that. But fortunately, the road, the journey with Jesus, is often merciful. It frequently hides the hard places from us at the times when we are too weak to accept them, to frail inwardly deal with them- not always, but many times.

All that the Holy One asks of us is that we put one foot in front of the other. And then do it again and again and again. . . And as we walk with him, we listen to his words and try to understand what he means and what he is asking of us. We eat the sacred meals with him and with the others on the journey. We talk to one another and we try to deal with one another precisely as companions on the way, as those whom we can carry when their feet are sore and as those who can carry us when we can't walk any more. We don't know, and we can't determine, where any of us will finally end up- that's not in our portfolio- but what is in our hands is learning to deal justly and lovingly with one as co-travelers, as comrades, as partners on the adventure.

"Then they abandoned their nets and *followed* him."- that's where it all begins!