

JANUARY 22ND, 2017: THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
Isaiah 8:23-9:3 I Corinthians 1:10-13, 17 Matthew 4:12-23

Throughout my early life, I was taught today's gospel pericope narrates Jesus' call to his first four priests. Nothing could be further from the theology Matthew's trying to convey. When Matthew composed his gospel – in the mid to late 70s – the priesthood as we know it didn't exist. All gospel "calls" by Jesus are simply calls to be a Christian: another Christ. They certainly aren't directed to a specific group of people who exercise one particular ministry in the community. On the contrary, they're addressed to every one of the evangelists' original readers. If we claim to be Christians, they're directed to us. That's why it's essential to look carefully at each element of today's call.

First, these initial disciples are called to follow a person, not an institution with particular sets of rules or regulations or even some philosophic concepts. And they have no idea where this person's leading them. They're just to "come after" him, wherever and whatever that entails. All they know is that people, not fish, will now be the most important element in their lives.

There's no delay, no looking back. They immediately leave their boats, nets, even their father, and "follow him." Jesus' call marks a new beginning of their lives. Their response is the concrete "repentance" Jesus demands of all his followers: a total change of their value systems. Only those who achieve such a "metanoia" will eventually experience the "kingdom of heaven" - God working effectively - around and among them.

One way Paul of Tarsus, writing almost 20 years before Matthew, experienced God in his daily life was by the oneness of the Christian community. This seems to be why he's so disturbed by what's happening in the Corinthian church. Its members don't appear to be disturbed at all by the "divisions" among them. They've actually created factions based on who was baptized by whom. The claim "I belong to Christ" seems to be Paul's frustrated reminder that everyone was baptized into Christ, not into Paul or Cephas. And if they were baptized into Christ, they were baptized into his death; a death they're expected to imitate by becoming one community, freed of all divisions. The Apostle suspects he's failed at his primary calling - being a preacher of the gospel – since so many in Corinth have, by their separatist actions, "emptied" the cross of Christ of its meaning.

Though Isaiah seems to be referring to a pull-back of invading 8th century BCE Assyrian troops when he mentions a "great light" breaking into what's been a "land of gloom," we can all identify with his light/darkness imagery. We often find ourselves looking for any rays of light in this dark world we inhabit. Paul had found one of those light rays in the Corinthian Christian community he evangelized. Now he fears the gloom has returned.

Perhaps we've become so accustomed to the division between clergy and laity which the eventual development of the priesthood created in the church that we rarely reflect on what our Christian communities would be like without that stratification. Growing up as a Catholic boy, I presumed the only "call" worthwhile receiving was the call to be a priest. If I didn't get one of those, then, by default, I guess Christ was calling me to be a married layman.

Back in the 60s and 70s I'd ask students in my high school religion classes if they felt they were inferior members of the church because they weren't priests. Almost all of them answered, "Yes!" I hope that's changed somewhat today. If it hasn't, either we're not listening carefully to Matthew or Paul, or we've been hearing lousy homilies.

JANUARY 29TH, 2017: FOURTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
Zephaniah 2:3; 3:12-13 I Corinthians 1:26-31 Matthew 5:1-12a

I presume one of the most difficult things the historical Jesus encountered as an itinerant preacher was simply to get people to “try it:” to actually carry out the unique concepts he was sharing; to weave these new behavior patterns into their daily lives. Matthew has placed many (but not all) of these concepts in his well-known Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7). For the next four weekends we’re going to be hearing some of Jesus’ “unconventional” ways of relating to others.

I once paraphrased several of these concepts and read them to a junior boys’ religion class, asking just two questions: “Who said this?” and “What do you think about what he or she said?” Though at that point they had at least 10 years of Catholic religious education, not one student could tell me who taught the morality Matthew included in his Sermon on the Mount!

One young man finally raised his hand and said, “I don’t know who said those things, but whoever it was must have been crazy!” Most people find it quite difficult to both appreciate and imitate the faith of Jesus.

That seems to be why Paul of Tarsus not only was amazed that some Corinthians could do both, but it also forced him to reflect on the caliber of people who actually pulled this off. “Not many of you,” he writes, “were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.” This certainly ran counter to his expectations.

There could only be one reason for these most unlikely people to accept and imitate Jesus’ dying and rising: God. Who else would have chosen “the lowly and despised of the world, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who are something?” As the historical Jesus had promised, the Apostle eventually discovered God at work in these “weak, foolish” individuals.

Paul’s experience ran parallel to that of the classic Hebrew prophets like Zephaniah. Like all those unique individuals who spoke in Yahweh’s name, Zephaniah had to deal with the disappointment that only a handful of Israelites actually listened to and carried out their words. Only this “poor, lowly remnant” dared “take refuge” in Yahweh. The vast majority of the prophet’s audience looked in other directions for the security they needed.

Yet as Jesus’ earliest followers also discovered, once someone commits himself or herself to relating to God and one another in a totally unselfish way, their whole lives turn upside down. That seems to be why Matthew chose to begin, not end his Sermon on the Mount with the “Beatitudes.” Though chronologically such a reflection usually happens at the end, not the beginning of our faith experience, it gives his readers something to look forward to.

Such things as poverty and mourning take on a deeper meaning. Seeking for righteousness – creating life-giving relationships with one another – gives us more satisfaction than anything else we’ll achieve in our lives. Being mercy-giving and peace-creating people turn us into the individuals God expects us to be.

But on the other hand, such a constant quest for righteousness will certainly bring problems and persecution. Many of our friends will believe we’re also “crazy.” Though we don’t enjoy such painful encounters, never should they weaken our determination to work at becoming other Christs. It’s the one thing that brings real blessedness – real satisfaction – to our otherwise humdrum lives.

The late Karl Rahner once remarked that once Christians become more than 20 per cent of the population, the faith becomes so watered down that it no longer has an effect on the world around us. In God’s plan, only an “insane” remnant can actually change things.