

Third Sunday Per Annum (B)

January 25, 2015.

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news (Mk. 1:14).

There is immediacy to both our Lord's call to conversion and the response of His first disciples to this call. Simultaneously they are both called *immediately* and they respond *immediately*. With his preaching of the Kingdom of God, our Lord's ministry has begun in earnest and we who commemorate the events of His earthly life do so that we ourselves might likewise respond to Him who today calls us to repentance and faith. He calls each of us to become His disciples and discipleship is best understood as the intimate following of Jesus.

The intimacy with which we respond to our Lord's call is the very same intimacy by which we are known by God. An early Christian author and mystic (Diadochus of Photice) explains: *Anyone who loves God in the depths of his heart has already been loved by God. In fact, the measure of a man's love for God depends upon how deeply aware he is of God's love for him* (*A Treatise on Spiritual Perfection*, in *Liturgy of the Hours*, Vol. III, p. 102). To arrive at this knowledge, a form of knowledge that is both intimate and life-changing, what is required above all is a discipline or what in spiritual terms is referred to an ascetical life. *Discipleship* and *discipline* are cognates. This effort is for all and it cannot be bypassed. The quest to know the God revealed to us by Jesus is both meaningless and impossible without an accompanying desire to change one's life so that we might be able to discern and understand with hearts and minds restored and purified. This is why our Lord calls us first to repent. Only then is it possible to believe and receive the good news.

Another mystic of the early Church, St. John Cassian, explains that the Christian disciple who seeks to attain the knowledge of God should do all that he can to remove the veil of sin that darkens the eyes of our heart. *Once these have been restored to their natural health, the simple reading of Sacred Scripture amply suffices all by itself for the contemplation of true knowledge* (Cassian, *Institutes*, 5, 34). This is why our confession of sin at the beginning of Holy Mass and the regular reception of the Sacrament of Confession are essential components to our Catholic life.

As St. Mark further recounts the call of our Lord's first disciples and the choosing of the Twelve Apostles, he writes: *And he went up on the mountain, and called to him those whom he desired; and they came to him. And he appointed twelve, to be with him, and to be sent out to preach and to have authority to cast out demons* (Mk. 3:13-15). Although the text says that *he appointed twelve*, it literally says that *he made twelve*; in the same manner that in our Gospel text our Lord says, *Come follow me and I will make you fishers of men*. The use of this verb is very significant for as the Prophet Isaiah declares, *Yet, O Lord, thou art our Father; we are the clay, and thou art our potter; we are all the work of thy hand* (Is. 64:8). In this process by which we are formed into disciples there are as it were, five elements that make up the reality of discipleship or the intimate following of Jesus: (1) our solitude with Jesus, (2) His freedom in choosing and calling, (3) our response to the call (4) the shared life of companionship with our Lord and the other disciples, and (5) the mission to teach and heal (Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, *The Way of the Disciple*, p.36).

All of these elements define our own discipleship. What is noteworthy is that of these five elements, only the fifth involves any visible activity in the world. The other four are interior work and indeed represent the essence of our experience as disciples of Jesus, with the visible apostolate as fruit. In other words, to be authentic disciples, the greater part of our time and effort must be dedicated simply to yielding to the work that God wants to do in us. This happens in the quiet of personal prayer and reflection and in an explicit and firm desire on our part to be one with our Lord for He Himself has told us, *apart from me you can do nothing* (Jn. 15:5). What the Gospels clearly attest to is that *he transformed very ordinary and unpromising persons into active vessels of divine grace, a feat that only God himself can accomplish through a work that merits the name of re-creation* (Ibid. p. 37). We express this truth liturgically during the celebration of Holy Mass. Yes, God and creation are joined. At the Offertory of the Mass, the wine poured into the Chalice represents our Lord's divine nature, while the drop of water that is mixed with it represents His human nature – and with it ourselves. Just as the two are mingled in the chalice and can no longer be separated, by endeavouring to be one with our Lord and by joining our sacrifice to the one being offered on the Altar, we hope to become one with Christ our Lord through the Eucharist. This sacramental union with our Lord becomes present in the world through our committed discipleship and this is truly the greatest force in the world. Indeed it is truly radical Catholicism for it is rooted in Christ Himself.

The call to repentance that is made in the Gospel today is a call that will be issued corporately on Ash Wednesday, less than a month from now. The call to repentance is a call to mortification, self-denial, patience, humility, chastity and charity. This is the true face of Catholicism because this is also the true face of Christ our Lord. These virtues comprise the content of what we term reparation and atonement and our Lord has clearly taught us that these are needed if we wish to be one with Him. It is not too early to give some thought to our Lenten discipline. Let us give some consideration to strengthen our relationship with our Lord. When we are deliberately conscious of our election in Christ then we make time to be with Him; to abide with Him so as to be sent by Him to teach and heal. The world needs the Truth of Christ just as it needs His Compassion.

Our Lenten discipline is at the service of our discipleship. Our Lenten sacrifices are most certainly at the service of Christian charity which is always expressed in the healing and transformation of the individual person. This active component however is only the last of five elements of discipleship or intimate following of Jesus which presupposes that we know Him personally. May I suggest that if possible, we resolve in addition to Sunday Mass, to make an effort to attend the Holy Sacrifice once more during the week out of devotion. Our Saviour who has chosen and called us to Himself has a task for us as He did for Simon and Andrew and James and John. Our tasks surely vary but the heart of our discipleship is our personal, intimate following of Jesus.