

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time; Year B

When I read the New Testament, I sometimes get the feeling that discipleship, back then, was a relatively simple matter. I find myself thinking that those first followers of Christ had an advantage over all succeeding generations of Christians and especially over those of us who are seeking to implement our discipleship many years later. After all, they had a physical presence of Jesus. They could see his footprints in the sand and could literally walk in his steps.

Today's gospel reading tells of one occasion when Jesus called Peter and Andrew, James and John to become his disciples. They were fishermen and no doubt, planned to practice that profession for the rest of their lives. But Jesus interrupted those plans with a simple invitation: "Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men." The response of the four to that invitation is described: "Peter and Andrew immediately abandoned their nets and became his followers. James and John abandoned their father Zebedee and went off in his company."

And it is those last five words to which I am reacting. These four fishermen became followers of Christ and actually "went off in his company." They headed down the road together. Probably, they stopped somewhere that night, built a fire, cooked some food, and sat and talked. They could see him with their eyes; they could hear him with their ears; they could touch him with their hands.

That is what it meant for those four fishermen to become followers of Christ. There was something concrete and real about their discipleship.

But what does it mean today? Is it realistic for us to think and talk about being the follower of a man who lived and died over two thousand years ago? We have no physical presence; we can hear no real voice. The winds have covered the footprints in the sand. We cannot literally walk in his steps. So, it would seem that those first followers had a distinct advantage. If, however, we think this matter all the way through, it could be that we will change our minds. In fact, we may even end up concluding that we are the ones who hold the advantage.

Let's consider this issue first as it applies to most any great personality. Suppose, for example, we had lived at the same time as Shakespeare. Would we have known him better and understood him better than we do today? To the contrary, the chances are that we would not have known him at all nor understood him nearly as well. As far as physical presence is concerned, it is uncertain we would have ever seen him, even if we had lived in the same country; and it is almost certain that we would not have spent so much as an afternoon with him.

Shakespeare achieved some fame and received some recognition among his contemporaries; but it was a hundred years after his death before anyone undertook the writing of his biography. Like most great men, his genius was not fully appreciated during his lifetime. If we had lived when he lived and where he lived, there is not one chance in a thousand that we would have known him as well as we know him today. Many of the details of his life have been lost, but the meaning of his work has been expounded and interpreted on stage and in print. Great teachers and great actors have shared with us the depth of his thoughts and feelings. If you and I really want to, we can understand Shakespeare better than most of his own hometown people.

Can not the same thing, in a very real sense, be said with reference to Jesus? Read the four Gospels and see how frequently and how badly he was misunderstood, even by his closest friends. Suppose you had lived in Nazareth when he did. Do you think you would have recognized who and what he was, or would you have been one of those who called him “the carpenter, the son of Mary?”

And I can’t help but wonder where you and I would have stood in the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish establishment. Keep in mind that most of his adversaries were men of station and rank, highly esteemed in their community. Many of them had money and power, and all of them were the defenders of a long-established

religious tradition. Jesus was a young man from Galilee, with no credentials except himself; yet he openly challenged the establishment. It was not long before there were rumors that the authorities were out to get him. Let me ask you something: If you had been there, which side would you have taken? Do you really believe that you could have seen the right and wrong of the issues? Are you firmly convinced that you would have walked with a poor carpenter in disobedience of those who ruled the community?

I cannot speak for anyone here; but speaking for myself, I am glad I wasn't there. I don't trust myself that much, and I am not at all certain that I would have been on the right side. I am glad that I can view his life in retrospect. I am glad that I can hear his voice across the centuries, where his truth has been tested and proven time and time again. It is hard enough for me to believe him even now; why should I think I would have believed him anymore back then? No, if anyone has the advantage in recognizing, understanding, and following the Christ, it was not those first disciples. It is you and I.

Then a second difficulty occurs with regard to modern discipleship, and that is the question of following a first century personality in a twenty first century world. Jesus never rode in a car, never saw a subway, never went to a movie, never heard of an airplane, never dreamed of radio or television. How could one who lived so long ago teach us anything about living today? Does it make

good sense for us to link our religion with the first century when our lives must be lived in the twenty first?

At first glance, that objection seems quite plausible; but it is not as difficult to answer as one might think. You see, all of the progressive change that has made our modern world so different from that ancient world, has lain almost entirely in the realm of technology. But when you look at the realm of spiritual values, of ethics and morals, then progressive change is not quite so obvious. We can rightly boast that the means by which we live are very much superior, but the ends for which we live and the inner strength by which we live - these are another matter. It is not quite so easy for us to feel superior in the realm of the spirit.

Think of those first disciples who went out to face an unfriendly world armed with nothing but courage, peace and joy. Those men and women overcame their world by the sheer force of victorious living. Does anyone here really feel morally superior to that? Think of the things that Jesus taught and lived. "Love God with all of your heart and your neighbor as yourself." Does anyone here wish to condescend to that? Think of his Golden Rule: "Do to others what you would have them do to you." Does anyone here feel shackled to the ancient past by that? No, my friends, our problem is not that we are looking back at Jesus. Our problem is trying to catch up with him, because he is as far ahead of the twenty first century as he was the first. And the

best thing that could happen to our modern world would be for us to close that gap just a little, if only we can.

Moments ago, we read of four fishermen who “became Jesus followers” and “went off in his company.” You and I can do the same thing. We no longer have his physical presence but do that matter? We have him; we know who he is; we know what he stands for. We know where he is going; and we can walk with him, even in this modern world, if we have the courage to pay the price. **Amen.**