

## Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

*As he passed by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus saw Simon and his brother, Andrew casting their nets into the sea. "Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men." Then they abandoned their nets and followed him.*



Mark 1, 14-20

All stories are true. However, they are not necessarily factual. You all know the story of George Washington owning up to cutting down his father's cherry tree. Did Mr. Washington Snr have a cherry tree? Did young George have an axe? Those details are irrelevant. The "truth" of the story is the message it conveys about honesty and a preparedness to admit one's mistakes.

Today's gospel gives us Mark's account of how Jesus invited two sets of brothers - Simon & Andrew and James & John to be his disciples. I have a sneaking suspicion that these men who had spent their lives as fishermen did not just drop everything and chase after Jesus. Life just does not happen like that. We have to take into account that they belonged to a society in which work, immediate family and extended family were closely intertwined. Add to that the fact that, in verse 30 of this first chapter of Mark, reference is made to Jesus curing Simon's mother-in-law, and you soon realize that Simon would have had family commitments to honour. All of this, of course, raises the question as to whether being one of Jesus' apostles was a full-time occupation. I suggest not.

Mark tells the story the way he does in order to make the point that there are no half-measures when it comes to being a disciple of Jesus. Following Jesus calls for total commitment. Mark includes the dimension of immediacy to make the point that Jesus and his message were so attractive and compelling that Simon, Andrew, James and John could not resist throwing in their lot with Jesus. The dimension of "dropping everything" reinforces the message that nothing other than total commitment is acceptable when it comes to discipleship. But that totality, I suggest, is in terms of intensity and quality rather than length of time.

And that's the mirror that is held up to us in which to assess the quality of our own discipleship. Today's gospel story challenges us about the genuineness of our discipleship. Do we put conditions on our commitment to Jesus and his Gospel? Does our behavior suggest that we give only notional assent to being disciples of Jesus, that we accept Jesus and his Gospel, but we'll get serious about them when we have more time and fewer responsibilities? Commitment to Jesus is about the quality of our relationships and the activities in which we engage as we go about our lives. It's not about badgering those around us with pious platitudes or trying to convince them to give their allegiance to Jesus. Jesus and his Gospel are about right relationships with everybody, about equality and respect and dignity for all. Following Jesus means doing our bit to ensure that these things are promoted and lived out in our spheres of influence.

So, one of the first challenges for us is to identify for ourselves just what discipleship of Jesus really looks like in our contemporary world. It does not mean irresponsibly dropping everything and everybody around us and running off to join a monastery or a band of door-knocking preachers.

There have been times and circumstances that have called for radical and dramatic witness to Jesus and his Gospel. Such times and circumstances prompted people like Francis of Assisi, Teresa of Avila and Ignatius Loyola to make their radical decisions and commit themselves totally to following Jesus.

Being authentic disciples of Jesus in the contemporary world calls for nothing less than living our lives in resonance with the Gospel and with total integrity, working for justice and ensuring that all our relationships with family, neighbours, work colleagues, and with the earth itself are grounded in justice and respect and compassion.

Discipleship of Jesus finds expression in any number of very ordinary ways. I am reminded of an African-American parish I sometimes attended while I was studying in St. Louis in the late 1970s. At the end of Mass, the parish priest would say: "Now, let's take each other's hands, and turn and look who you're holding hands with, and hold on tight, because we're going to need each other this week." The practice struck me at first as being somewhat artificial. However, last year I read an article about a parish priest who concluded Sunday Mass the same way. However not a few of his parishioners reported not knowing how to deal with problems and crises that popped up in their family and personal lives until it occurred to them that they could ring the person whose hand they held at Mass the previous Sunday.

Discipleship, being "fishers" of women and men, is an invitation to reflect the love of God to all we meet. It is a challenge to proclaim, through our ordinary living, the compassion, the forgiveness and the justice of the Gospel. God is present to us and our world in the person of Jesus. As disciples of Jesus, we commit ourselves to reflect the love and care and compassion of Jesus to all the people who are part of the fabric of our lives.