

THE CALL OF THE DISCIPLES



Matthew 4:18 "As (Jesus) walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea --- for they were fishermen. And he said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.' (And) Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him."

We have all witnessed that scene many times. For it is depicted in almost every Jesus movie out there. It is a beloved image. As described in the Gospel reading today, Jesus passes by along the Sea of Galilee and sees Peter and Andrew fishing, calls to them with the simple words, 'follow me,' and 'immediately,' we

are told, 'they left their nets and followed him' (4:18). A little farther along the shore, Jesus sees James and John, the sons of Zebedee, and they too immediately followed when Jesus called them, leaving behind their boat and even their own father mending the nets there. A straightforward reading of this story suggests that Jesus simply moved along the shore of the Sea of Galilee and began to call those whom he chose to be his apostles, and that at the simple words "follow me," they dropped everything to follow Jesus, leaving behind their homes, their families, their livelihoods. Hollywood in its various versions of Jesus' life has reinforced this mysterious image of Jesus to whom perfect strangers seem to respond without hesitation, leaving behind everything dear to them, and drawn simply by the magnetism of his charisma.

That image of the beginning of Jesus' public ministry is an impressive one, and suggests the kind of compelling authority that we often attribute to Jesus. But that account can also be very disturbing. For what if Jesus were to pass by here, and out of the blue call out to us "follow me?" "Follow me." Would we go? Could we leave behind the security of our families and friends and livelihoods to follow a perfect stranger? Would we leave behind everything that was dear to us? There are numerous stories in church history about saints who did just that. And I have heard many a preacher pose the question in just that sort of way, as if this story is the paradigm of our call to follow Jesus. This image

then might fill us with a sense of guilt or fear even, because so few of us ever hear the call of Jesus so clearly, and because we know all too well our own hesitations and doubts and attachments that are not so easily given up in order to follow Jesus.

However, a more careful reading of the Scriptures reveals that the picture in today's Gospel may be misleading. Last week's reading from the Gospel of John had a different account about the call of Andrew and Peter. In that version from last week's Gospel, you will remember, Andrew is first identified as a disciple of John the Baptist, who with another unnamed disciple of John, trailed after Jesus in Bethany when John the Baptist first pointed Jesus out to them on the street, "Behold the Lamb of God," he said. In that account, Jesus seems surprised by their actions, turned, and saw them following him and said to them, 'What are you looking for?' They wanted to know where he was staying, and as you may recall, they stayed with him that day. And as you may remember, Andrew, it was recorded there, first went and found his brother Simon Peter, saying to him, "We have found the Messiah," and then brought him to Jesus, who nicknamed him 'the rock,' 'petra' or 'cephas'.

Today's story is clearly more picturesque, a more romantic and compelling image of Jesus calling apparent strangers to follow him! That's why this version is always chosen for the movies. But we cannot let our desire to idealize the life of Jesus distract us

from the real facts revealed in the Scriptures. In last week's account, the more likely version of the first call of Andrew and Peter, they are not exactly called by Jesus, but both are drawn to him by the influence of others. For Andrew and the other unnamed disciple, it was John the Baptist who encouraged them to follow Jesus. And in Peter's case, it was his own brother Andrew who sought him out and brought him to Jesus (Jn. 1:35-42).

And on the day after Andrew went and got his brother Simon Peter, Jesus decided to go to Galilee, according to John's Gospel, and there he found Philip and said to him those memorable words, "Follow me." Philip, the passage there mentions, was from the same city as Andrew and Peter (Jn. 1:44). Indeed, Philip and Andrew are so often named together in the Scriptures, that it is often assumed that Philip was that other, unnamed disciple of John the Baptist, who with Andrew first followed Jesus in Bethany in last week's Gospel. And once in Galilee, Philip, as many will remember, went and got his friend Nathanael to join them (Jn. 1:45). It was Philip who found Nathanael, not Jesus, and it was Philip who besought Nathaniel to "come and see" after Nathanael asked whether anything good could come out of Nazareth.

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who were called in today's reading, according to Luke's Gospel, were fishing partners with Simon Peter (Lk. 5:10), who was fishing in today's Gospel with his brother Andrew. These men then were not strangers to one

another, but apparently friends and brothers and business partners in the fishing trade. It might also be noted that Salome, the wife of Zebedee and therefore mother of John and James, was also a follower of Jesus (cf. Mk. 15:40, Mt. 27:56) and she was listed among that group of women from Galilee who accompanied Jesus in Judea. Mark names Salome with the other women at the Crucifixion and later at the grave on Easter morning (Mk. 15:40, 16:1).

Matthew does not explicitly name her on these occasions but only identifies her there as 'the mother of James and John.' The Fourth Gospel on those occasions identifies her as the sister of Jesus' mother (Jn. 19:25), which would make Salome Jesus' aunt, and James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Jesus' cousins, which may be why they were part of that inner circle of Apostles with their fishing partner Simon Peter, and which may also explain why James and John sought to sit on their cousin Jesus' right hand and on his left in his Kingdom.

The closeness of Jesus' followers can become even more intimate with a couple of further observations. One of the other women from Galilee that followed Jesus is identified as Mary, wife of Clopas (Jn. 19:25). Hegessipus, the second century church historian, mentioned a brother of Jesus' father, whose name was Clopas (H.E. 3.11). This Mary may then have been another of Jesus' aunts. Moreover, Clopas might also be identified with the disciple to whom Jesus appeared on the road to Emmaus after his

Resurrection (Lk. 24:18), as Clopas is an abbreviation of the name Cleopas, as it appears there. In that case both this aunt and uncle were disciples of Jesus. And there is another Mary mentioned at the cross, who is identified as the mother of James and Joseph (Mt. 27:55). This James might be the same as the Apostle James who is elsewhere identified as the son of Alphaeus (Mt. 10:3). The Apostle Matthew, the tax-collector, is also called the son of Alphaeus (Mk. 2:14) and perhaps was a follower of Jesus along with James his brother, just as Simon Peter and Andrew were brothers, as were John and James, the sons of Zebedee.

The important point here is that the disciples are less of a randomly selected group of strangers who Jesus individually called as he walked along the Sea of Galilee, and more likely a group of friends and family and business partners who followed Jesus at the urging of one and another. The picture here is less of a divine call clearly coming down from on high, some kind of charismatic voice from a stranger, than a true call coming from one and another to join with them. The undeniable conclusion is that those who followed Jesus were not all called by the same voice. And they were bound to Jesus and to each other in all sorts of different ways. They were not a scattered group of fellow countrymen, but a close community of family and friends and colleagues. They were definitely not strangers who dropped everything at the magnetic call of Jesus.

Last week, I talked about those seven terrible words that every Rector hates to hear, the phrase that goes "You know what you need to do?" You know what you need to do, someone regularly will ask me, rhetorically of course, and then they will proceed to tell me exactly what they think I need to do. And no matter what that something is, it is usually not something that the questioner is doing. They are not inviting me to join them in some activity; they are simply telling me what they want *me* to do, for them, not with them.

However, generally in these stories of the disciples' calls, they were most often invited by others to *join* them in this activity of following Jesus. John the Baptist beckons two of his disciples to follow Jesus. Andrew invites his brother Peter. Philip invites his friend Nathanael. Our call to follow Jesus, therefore, to take up leadership roles within the fellowship, to stand for Vestry, to volunteer at the Food Bank, to donate blood, to serve on a committee or join a class, may, more often than not, comes indirectly from friends and family members and colleagues at work. Our call comes more often from the inescapable community in which we already find ourselves. And though it is more oftentimes less clear and direct than we might want, less like a voice from heaven, it is no less demanding, and no less real, and no less legitimate.

It is apparent from these stories in the Gospels of the disciples' calls, that WE are seen as responsible for calling each other to follow Jesus, to join us in this activity. We are responsible then for inviting our friends, and family members, and even colleagues at work, to 'come and see' what we have found, to join with us in what we are doing, to become a part of the family of God, to share the ministry in the life of this parish to serve our community. Our individual calls then are not simply to follow Jesus, but are also to call others to follow him as well. Thus, I invite, encourage and welcome each and every one of you to take an active role in the life and ministry and mission of St. John's, and to invite your family, friends and neighbors to come join us as well. For only together can we accomplish what God has called us all to do. AMEN.