

Church of the Good Shepherd and St. John the Evangelist

3 Epiphany
January 22, 2006
Fr. Bill McGinty

“When ‘ Follow Me!’ Means More Than Follow Me!”

Have you ever looked back on your life and wished that you had made a decision differently? That’s the problem with choices. Choices call for commitment and we rarely get the opportunity to second guess them. Today’s Gospel story finds Jesus on the shore of the Sea of Galilee and he is calling Simon, Andrew, James and John and he is asking them to make a choice. It is a choice to follow him.

Mark, the storyteller, makes it sound as if this is the first time that they have all met. That in itself is doubtful. Mark’s gospel is fragmented and this is more likely the last few lines of a story where the Apostles have known Jesus for some time. We never get to learn how many people Jesus asked, or how many had already said: “no!”

Down the centuries Jesus invitation: “Follow me!” has been used in the narrow sense, as a call to mission and ministry, but really it is a call to all of us. It is a moment of theophany where we meet Jesus at a personal and intimate level and we are invited to participate in his salvation.

For most of us, there is no threat here, but for Christians in Mark’s Rome there was every threat. Choosing Christ and becoming a Christian was no casual affair. Jesus was dangerous to know, and sharing his teaching could bring exile imprisonment and even death.

Today’s Gospel is about choosing, choosing to answer Jesus’ call, “Follow me!” It is not just a call to journey or even a call to ministry. When Jesus comes into your life, it is about transformation.

At its deepest level, ‘Follow me’ is an invitation to a master class in what it means to be human. Jesus teaches basic truths that we know appeal to our spirit. When we see these virtues in others we admire them and would wish to emulate them.

In the Gospels there are other people, besides the Apostles, who take an interest in Jesus, and want to learn his secrets. They want to know the answer to age old questions about the very meaning of life. One asks Jesus: “Master which is the greatest commandment?” while another asks him: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus lived in an age of soothsayers, astrologists and people who daily sought a cure for the Human Condition. Our society is no different. Jesus could have answered both by saying: “Come Follow Me!” Come and learn what I have to teach you about life.

To the first he replies in the words of Israel’s ancient covenant prayer: “Hear O Israel the Lord your God is one and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your

The Rev. William J. McGinty, Rector
110 West Catharine Street, Milford, Pennsylvania 18337
Phone: (570) 296-8123 ♦ Fax: (570) 296-4383

Church of the Good Shepherd

and

St. John the Evangelist

soul and all your mind. The second commandment is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

To the other question: “How can I inherit eternal life? Jesus replies: “leave everything and come follow me!”

The answers that Jesus gives are the heart of his teaching, and his message. He has come to breathe God’s soul back into Creation. He has come to make people choose, to choose between love and hate, forgiveness and revenge, beauty or ugliness. Salvation is about choosing. It is a choice to evolve to a higher plain. Jesus calls what he is trying to do the “Kingdom of God.” All his teaching demonstrates those virtues. The parables illustrate his meaning. His encounters with sinners, officials, children, and even his enemies, display a deeper humanity.

For Jesus that fellowship, that unselfish love that he calls people to, becomes symbolized in the breaking of bread.

Imagine if we did want to take Christ at his word and literally love God with all our heart and mind and soul. That is an enormously, difficult task. Is it possible to love an abstraction with all your heart and mind and soul? Which is precisely why Jesus changed the words of the Old Testament covenant and added: “And your neighbor as yourself” It is a radical teaching. For Judaism it is a radical teaching that somehow you can truly love God by loving your fellow human being.

When we first understand these words we have a tendency to say: “I can do that. I can love God by loving my neighbor.”

This is true up to a point. The point usually being that we can love our neighbor if he or she is bright, intelligent, pretty, thin, healthy, Western, kind, understanding and wealthy. Teachers instinctively know this because over many years they encounter every kind of kid. Play the game of favoring the bright, the talented, the beauty or the rich and you soon learn important lessons. 1).The real characters in class are usually none of those things. 2). Above all else kids value fairness. Yet, in the way we deal with our neighbor, and the judgments we make are rarely fair. Do we honestly treat people equally or equitably if they are dumb, stupid, ugly, fat, poor, foreign, nasty, and mentally sick or dressed badly?

If Jesus’ teaching is, that we can love God in everyone, if we can see God in everyone, what do we see in the murderer, the thief, the deadbeat, the dictator, the cheat, the terrorist, war mongers, wasters, the Klu Klux Klan, gamblers, liars, punk rockers, rap stars and tele-marketers?

For each of these, there is a story or a parable in Jesus’ teaching that fits. “There but for the grace of God go I” is an old Christian saying that our parents and grandparents used.

Jesus in the Gospel surrounded himself with sinners, prostitutes, thieves and tax collectors. He told them that God his Father loved them. He told them to believe and to sin

The Rev. William J. McGinty, Rector
110 West Catharine Street, Milford, Pennsylvania 18337
Phone: (570) 296-8123 ♦ Fax: (570) 296-4383

Church of the Good Shepherd

and

St. John the Evangelist

no more. Jesus' ministry and his love of the marginalized, extends to his giving of himself for them even onto death.

Seen in this light Jesus' invitation to "Follow me" is an invitation to revolution. If by revolution we mean radical change, Jesus was inviting his disciples to radical change. Americans know about revolution, history teaches us that it means change. We don't think of the Gospel that way, because we like our Christ to be sweet, gentle, and moderate. But what if Jesus is not like that? What if Jesus is hopping mad that after 2000 years our churches still have not gotten the lesson that to 'love God you have to love everyone' and equally. It is only when you do that that change happens within yourself. For Jesus is not saying: "Follow me" to form a fan club. Jesus is saying: "Follow me" meaning: "become like me. You become Christ for people who truly need me."

St Paul says it to his Christians, over and over: "Put on Christ."

Last week I watched: "The Book of Daniel" on television. It's a show about an Episcopal priest, his family and parish in Westchester. Intermittently, Jesus appears talking to Fr. Daniel in his living room, most of their conversation is about the wealthy goings on in the parish. I couldn't help but think that we had turned Jesus into some kind of priest friend of the Kennedy family.

The message of Jesus' Gospel, the Gospel values, and how we can turn around our lives, and make them productive in participating in the story of salvation has little to do with life in St Bartholomew's, Westchester, and everything to do with the true meaning of the words: "Follow me!"

The fact is that most of us have heard those words "follow me" in our lives already. We know what they mean. We know who said them to us. We want to commit and we want to respond, because we know it is our Christ who speaks. We just don't want to commit all the way. Especially, if Jesus is going to make demands of us. We'll put our toe in the water and wiggle it around a bit, but we are afraid to take the plunge.

We are lucky because Jesus has given us a way out. He has invited us to be the Body and as his Body to respond collectively. As the Body of Christ we respond to Jesus' command: "Follow me."

Let us, then, not turn Jesus and his teaching into something it is not. Let us as one body love God by loving what Christ loved and cared about. Let us too be radical, on behalf of all who have no voice or are not treated equally. Then the God of Mercy will bless us and his Kingdom will come to pass.

Amen+

The Rev. William J. McGinty, Rector
110 West Catharine Street, Milford, Pennsylvania 18337
Phone: (570) 296-8123 ♦ Fax: (570) 296-4383