

A Sermon for the Feast of St. Matthew, given on September 24, 2006

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“Follow me.” Jesus called Peter and Andrew, saying, “Follow me and I will make you fishers of men” (Matt. 4:19). In today’s gospel “Jesus...saw a man, named Matthew, sitting at the receipt of custom; and he said to him, Follow me.” (Matt. 9:9ff. BCP p. 251). In confirmation we were asked, “Do ye promise to follow Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour?” (BCP p. 297).

There are a couple of notable things to reflect upon in the call to follow Jesus. First, there are no prerequisites. Jesus didn’t give Matthew a list of things he had to do before he was worthy to become a follower. To be sure, Matthew had to repent. Tax Collectors were noted for acts of extortion and dishonesty. In beginning to follow Jesus, Matthew committed himself to change. But, in the opinion of Jesus, nothing about his former life disqualified him from becoming a disciple.

In the gospel, Jesus said that he had not “come to call the righteous but sinners.” Implicit in the call to follow Jesus is the assumption that the person being called is not following Jesus, is not doing the will of God and is, thus, “a sinner.” Many people think that they have to become good before they can be a follower of Jesus. The reality is that we become good as we follow Jesus.

The liturgy teaches us this. We are not here to celebrate our innate goodness. “We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins.” “We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table.” We suffer in various ways from the disease of sin and we come to the Great Physician to receive the medicine of immortality.

This leads us to the second thing we can observe in the call to follow. It is not exactly clear where we are going. In Matthew 8:18, “A scribe came up and said to [Jesus], ‘Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Foxes have holes, and birds have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head’” (8:18). Jesus was saying, I have no specific earthly destination or home. If you follow me thinking that you are going to get some specific thing, you may be disappointed.

When we are going somewhere and we don’t know how to get there, a friend might say, “Follow me.” Our task, then, is to keep our car in close proximity to the friend’s car as we run a gauntlet of street lights and crazy drivers. We must keep our eyes on the friend, not knowing what street he may take or what challenges we may encounter along the way.

We follow the friend because we trust he will lead us to the place we want to go. We follow Jesus because we trust we will end up in God’s kingdom if we follow him. Jesus said to the apostles, “You who have followed me will sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And every one who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life” (19:28). We know the final destination but not the details of the way to get there.

This is, incidentally, one of the evils of horoscopes, Ouija boards and other occult means of discerning the future. God does not want you to know the details of your future. He wants you to live by faith, to trust him for daily bread.

Now, there is one clear difference between the call to follow that Jesus issued to the fishermen and Matthew and the call he issues to us. They literally followed him. He went to Galilee, they went to Galilee. He went to Jerusalem, they went to Jerusalem. Jesus has given us the Holy Spirit. We are called to follow where the Holy Spirit leads us.

When Jesus said something to his disciples, it was clear that what he said came from him. It may have been hard to understand or obey, but there was no doubt as to the source. But we hear many things from many sources and it is not always clear which voice is the voice of the Holy Spirit. There is, consequently, a need to discern.

Many people think they are being led by God when the prompting is really only their own inclination or, worse, a flattering demonic voice. We guard this error by prayer and Bible reading. If the Bible is the Word of God, then we must read it in order to know what God is saying.

We do not read the Bible to find selected texts that will magically answer our questions. We read the Bible to understand our lives in terms of the biblical story. For example, in reading Matthew's gospel, we see that Jesus was baptized and then he was tested in the wilderness, just as Israel passed through the Red Sea to be tested in the wilderness. We come to see that this is the pattern for us. We understand that our baptisms will lead to a life of testing to prepare us for the world that is to come.

Apart from reading the Scripture, we might say, "Why is God doing this to me? But when we read the Scripture, we realize that this is the way it is for all the people of God.

We read the Bible within the tradition of the church. Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would lead the church into all truth. The Holy Spirit does not change his mind on the essentials of doctrine and morality. If the biblical revelation and the mind of the church have been consistent for 2000 years, we should not follow a voice that rejects the tradition.

To follow Jesus, we also need the counsel of faithful Christian friends—friends who are not afraid to tell us if we are wrong. We follow Jesus as part of a community that is following him. There is great danger of error when we try to follow Jesus alone.

As Jesus says in John's gospel, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand" (10:27).