

Epiphany 3 / January 24, 2021

Mark 1:14

“Follow me.”

Has anyone asked you to follow them? You have to be careful who you follow. You never know where they might lead you! Did you ever play follow the leader when you were a child? In case you have forgotten, players have to correctly mimic the actions of the leader. The leader performs an action, seeking to trip up her or his followers so they fail. Players are eliminated when they fail to correctly follow the leader. The last person to correctly follow becomes the leader. Do you follow a leader? We all follow leaders, formally and informally. Are you a leader? People seek leadership positions informally in small groups, formally in organizations and most visibly in politics. Men and women campaign to become the leader of their party and government. They seek to gather followers, by promoting their good points and making promises that will benefit those who follow them. Whoever gathers the most followers becomes the leader.

In the ancient world teachers of religion and philosophy sought to attract followers. Philosophers made a name for themselves through public teaching and waited for would be students to request further and deeper instruction. The student asked to follow the leader. Likewise, in Judaism it was the disciple who requested to follow a rabbi. As in the academic world today, students paid for the privilege of following and being instructed by their teacher. While people commonly chose whom they would follow as teacher, Jesus chose and called His disciples to follow Him. In our gospel He calls Peter, Andrew, James and John to follow Him. In the gospel of John, He reminded them that He was the one who initiated their relationship with Him, saying “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you that you should go and bear fruit.”

Jesus initiated the relationship with the disciples and they responded immediately, without hesitation. That’s what is most remarkable about our gospel. He didn’t call them to mimic His actions in some mundane way, as in a game. He didn’t call them to support His leadership bid in Judaism. He called them to follow Him, heart and soul! He called them to drop what they were doing, give their lives up and follow Him. The famous Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who resisted the Nazi party in Germany at the cost of his life, observed that when Jesus calls a person, He calls him or her to die to themselves and live only for Him. That’s asking a lot! It’s asking everything. The disciples’ response reveals both the power of His words and His true identity as the Eternal Word of God, through whom all things came to be and in whom all things hold together. He is no ordinary leader. He is the Son of God. His words have divine power! He speaks the words of eternal life. All who hear His voice in faith and follow His call, receive blessing in time and life in eternity!

Jesus spoke and the disciples followed, immediately and without question! God spoke His word in creation and it was done, immediately and without resistance. God assured Isaiah of the power and efficacy of His word saying, “The word that goes forth from my mouth will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I send it.” Jesus speaks: the lame walk, the blind see and the dead are raised to life; immediately and completely. Jesus calls Peter, Andrew, James and John. They respond immediately, leave everything and follow Him. Jesus’ words and their effect on the physical world, the human body and especially the human spirit, show that He is no ordinary teacher seeking students to promote His philosophy, or religious leader seeking disciples to spread His opinions. He is the Son of God and His words are to be received as the Word of God.

People listened when Jesus spoke. His words were captivating and compelling. When He concluded the Sermon on the Mount people were amazed, not simply because of what He said, but because He spoke with authority and not like their teachers. He spoke, not as a prophet or teacher of scripture, but as the Son of God. The author of Hebrews wrote, “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son.” The first and most important thing the calling of the disciples shows, is that Jesus is the Eternal Son of God! When Jesus calls, He not only bids a person to die, He bids the dead in spirit to rise to life in His Spirit. Jesus’ words have power to accomplish what He desires and achieve the purpose for which He speaks them. His words give forgiveness, healing and life, immediately and completely.

When Jesus calls, the dead hear His voice and come to life. When the dead hear Jesus' voice, they have no choice but to rise to life. Jesus words have power over death; physical and spiritual. But having been made alive, the living can choose death over life. The living can choose to close their ears to His voice, harden their hearts to His word, hold their breath and die. When Jesus called, the physically dead came out of their graves. They had no choice. But having been made alive, they could have chosen death over life. Jesus called the disciples to follow Him. They came alive and followed Him in faith. But having followed Him, they could have chosen death to life and turned away in disbelief. At a certain point many who heard His voice and followed His call, turned away from following. They decided that instead of the words of life, He spoke the words of a madman. Jesus called Judas Iscariot to life to follow as His disciple, but at a certain point Judas rejected Jesus' words and chose death over life. Jesus calls us follow Him in faith. He gives us life. He calls us to chose life, by continuing to hear His voice and by consciously and intentionally following His call.

In the book of Revelation St. John was told, "Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power." The first death is the spiritual condition in which all humans, since the sin of have Adam are conceived and born into; spiritual death in relationship with God. The first resurrection is the rebirth of the human spirit in relationship to God through faith in Christ. Jesus calls us to life through the gospel! The second death, which is the hell of eternal separation from God, has no power over those who live with God through faith in Christ. Jesus calls us to live with Him in faith and follow Him in faithfulness. Faith is the work of God in the human spirit. God's work in the human spirit evokes a continuous response in faith and faithfulness. God works faith and faithfulness through the hearing of the gospel of Jesus throughout the course of our lives, until faith is made full in the second resurrection of eternal life.

Jesus calls us to follow Him in faith and in faithfulness, continuously receiving His grace and consciously sharing our faith with others. Jesus called the disciples to follow Him. He said He would make them fishers of human beings, calling others to receive the same gift of faith in His name, through the speaking of His word and by the working of the Holy Spirit. Faith is a moving, vital force that always expresses itself in action towards God and towards others. Faith looks to Christ for every blessing in time and for eternity. Faith seeks to share those blessings by expressing the gospel of Christ with others through words and actions.

The point of our gospel is not that the four disciples gave up their occupations, ceased fishing and walked around with Jesus. The gospels clearly show that they continued to fish in the sea of Galilee, during and after Jesus' ministry concluded. They remained fishers, but the orientation of their lives and the focus of their labour completely changed. They no longer laboured for the bread that endures for a day, but for the bread Jesus gives which a person may eat and live forever. They continued to work for their daily bread, but the scope of their service expanded to include the work of sharing the bread of life with others, by calling them to faith in Christ through word of the gospel.

Jesus called the disciples to follow Him and to share the gospel in His name, at the cost of creaturely comfort and even at the cost of their lives. They received little earthly benefit for their discipleship, none that the world would consider beneficial. They didn't become rich. They only became famous long after their deaths. In life they were infamous, as disturbers of the peace and as men who followed a condemned criminal. But they were blessed with life in Jesus' Name for time and eternity. They were blessed to share the name of Jesus with others, by their words, by the way they lived and by the way they died.

Jesus doesn't call us out of the world. He calls us in the world to walk with Him in faith and to share our faith with others, by following Him faithfully in the way we live and by the way we die. He calls us to see beyond the limits of this life and the constraints of death. He gives us a vision of the eternal to empower us to bear our burdens in time. Jesus calls as the Son of God. His words give life. He calls us to follow Him in faith. We follow by abiding in His words. In the gospel of John, He said, "Abide in me and I will abide in you." We abide in His word, by sharing His word with others, through our words and by the actions of our lives. Jesus calls, "Follow me!" God bless us with ears to hear His voice and with hearts to follow His call, in faith and in faithfulness. In Jesus' Name. Amen