

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, A – January 26, 2020 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Alabama – 8:30 & 11:00am Sunday Masses – 1,075 words

The Lord Jesus calls four of the twelve apostles in today's gospel; indeed, two sets of brothers: Peter and his brother Andrew, James and his brother John. These men, the first-called, would be among his closest collaborators, personally witnessing the greatest displays of his divinity as he walked this earth. And it says that they "immediately... followed him" upon receiving his call. Moreover, Jesus invited them to be "fishers of men" – that is, pastors who would "fish" not for subsistence but for souls, leaving behind their former way of life to embrace the new mission of drawing all people to the light of Christ. Indeed, later in the gospel, Peter would say to Jesus, "[Lord,] we have left everything to follow you".¹

The same Lord Jesus still calls men to follow him and to be "fishers of men" as priests today. But the times and the circumstances have drastically changed. We do not have the benefit, as it were, of having Christ in the flesh approach us and tell us of his plan. Rather, we must discern what that plan is and seek his Church's guidance and blessing. And though we share so many of the human traits and foibles of the original Twelve – to include even Judas's capacity for betrayal –, yet we cannot sit at the Master's feet and have him audibly and visibly guide us. Rather, we must fall at his feet in prayer and seek to perceive his "still, small voice" – and very often experience what seems to be his silence.

Yes, his silence. The Lord does not speak to us as we might wish. We have to learn how to hear and recognize his voice. And it is hard work. But the world around us becomes increasingly noisy, besides. How can a young man today know if the master of the harvest is calling him to be a laborer in his harvest? But more than the constant noise that invades our ears and hearts, competing with the voice of God, there is also the uncertainty and instability of our troubled times. Can a young man today truly commit himself to Christ? (Oh – but can he commit himself to a wife, for that matter? Even as we see a decrease in priestly numbers, we also see a decrease in Church marriages and even civil marriages.)

So how can a young man today know if Christ is calling him to be a "fisher of men"? All that the world has to offer us is facile advice: "follow your heart", people say! But is our heart a sure guide? It most certainly is not. The heart is the center of affectivity, of desire. But how are we hard-wired? A normal man is hard-wired for marriage. Marriage is part of our human nature. We naturally desire completion in another human being – to be precise, a person of the opposite sex. Our heart naturally points us to marriage. But priesthood is a supernatural calling. It is a divine vocation. We cannot hear that call from within, for it comes to us from without. The very common advice about "following our heart" is, in fact, very problematic.

But there is another sort of answer. Most of us have heard it said from our youth, "You can be anything you want!" Perhaps we have even said that to others. We do so to encourage them, surely; and the sentiment behind it is good. But what does it imply? It implies that we are in a sort of marketplace, where we can choose between any number of more-or-less equally-weighted options. We are the masters of our destiny! It suggests that we have a sort of neutrality before all the choices, being free to choose between any of them.² But is that really true? If my heart naturally guides me toward marriage, can I really say that I am neutral before it? Not at all. Besides, who has achieved such self-possession so early in life?

¹ Matthew 19:27.

² I am indebted to Fr. Aquinas Guilbeau, O.P., for his recent concise explanation of some of the contemporary problems with discernment, which served as inspiration for this homily. His commentary is found in, of all places, a Twitter thread: <https://twitter.com/FrAquinasOP/status/1212077942727200768> (December 31, 2019).

No, we need a better answer for our question about how a young man today can know if he is being called by Christ to be a fisher of men. Rather than looking to his affections and feelings, and rather than believing the pious lie that he can do basically whatever he wants, every Catholic young man must seriously ask himself the question: “Is Jesus Christ offering me the grace of the priesthood, which includes the grace to renounce marriage freely for the sake of his Kingdom?” And the answer to that question is not to be found in his confused and sometimes tortured heart, but in his mind – in that part of him that makes him most like God. It is there that Christ truly speaks, regardless of how one feels or what one wants.

A priest today, in the Latin or Roman Church, freely renounces marriage for the sake of the Kingdom and in anticipation of eternal life,³ where, as the gospels relate, “they neither marry nor are given in marriage”.⁴ This is not something that any man has the natural resources to do. Indeed, a man continues to desire marriage even after he is ordained, and that desire waxes and wanes throughout his priestly life. It is the call of nature, as it were. But at the same time, he is able to recognize that Christ has offered him the supernatural grace to live, even now, like all will live in the life to come. His nature cannot tell him that; only Jesus can. And we cannot hear Christ in the din of this world or in the muddled mess of our feelings.

I believe that there are many young men in our diocese whom God is calling to the priesthood. Indeed, I am filled with hope because I know many of them and can see the work of God already taking shape in their hearts. We must continue to pray that they will hear his call and leave everything to follow him. To all young men I say: I invite you *not* to follow your hearts! I invite you *not* to believe the half-truth that you can be anything you want! Seek out Christ and his plan, instead. Ask him if he is calling you. Ask him if he is offering you that grace! Do not rest until you know that you have gotten the answer: not from your feelings and emotions, nor from what others say – but from him.

³ The Roman discipline of celibacy has apostolic origins. As quoted above, the apostles “left everything” to follow Christ. Apostolic tradition holds that that included even leaving the marital embrace to imitate Christ, who was celibate. St. Paul, already in the New Testament, spoke very highly of celibacy. The idea that celibacy did not develop as a discipline until the late Middle Ages is a myth and a fabrication. A very accessible book that sets forth the evidence for these claims is, “The Case for Clerical Celibacy” by Alfons Cardinal Stickler (published by Ignatius Press).

⁴ Matthew 22:30.