

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Isaiah 8:23-9:3 / Matthew 4:12-23)
22.01.2017
At once...

There are two small words which we heard twice in our Gospel reading: “at once”. At once Peter and Andrew left their nets and, at once, James and John followed Jesus.

Matthew, who makes great use of this expression in his Gospel, wants to highlight the fact that the four apostles gave answer immediately to Christ's call and that their answer was somewhat unexpected.

When Christianity is the normal way in life of a country and its culture, urgency and surprise in the Christian calling are rarely experienced. I suppose that, for most of us, Christianity has been part of our family tradition for a long time. We are Christian, Catholic or Protestant, because our parents were of this denomination. This can make for no real sense of urgency in our vocation and no surprise in the fact that we are here this morning and every Sunday.

However each day provides us with an opportunity to answer God's call, and to do so with a sense of immediacy. Bl. John Henry Newman reminds us that “all through our life Christ is calling us. He called us first in Baptism; but afterwards also; whether we obey His voice or not, He graciously calls us still. (...) He calls us again and again, in order to justify us again, again, again and again – to sanctify and glorify us.” (*PPS*)

The important point is that in no way should we take our faith for granted. Our very existence, our daily tasks, all our meetings and decisions, all our relationships call forth a response from us, a renewed commitment to follow Christ at once. Everything that we do and say can become a *kairos* moment when we realise that we are called by God to choose Christ and his Gospel over and over again. As St Paul writes to the Corinthians: “See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation” (2Co 6:2). So, it is here, now and at once, that we are supposed to answer Christ's call.

When life does not challenge our faith, when it does not spur us on to recommit our lives to Christ on a regular basis, this means that either we have left Christ at the door of our lives or that we have tamed him so much that he is securely enclosed in some small niche.

If our faith is not questioned by the present international migrant crisis, by the messy political situation of the post-Brexit referendum, by the immaturity of our Northern-Irish politicians, by the difficulty of the young people to feel at home in our religious gatherings, by the fears that paralyse us, by the divisions between our Christian denominations, then we are no longer giving answer at once to Christ's calling in our lives, we have just settled into a lukewarm form of religiosity.

The Bible invites us repeatedly to be ready, to remain awoken, to be aware, attentive. What is meant by all these expressions could be summed up in the two small words of our Gospel reading: at once. The challenge for us is to imitate the four apostles in their attentiveness to Jesus' words, their readiness to obey them, to act upon them, and to do this with the whole of their lives. We know that the same apostles will be tested and fail; they will have to say yes to Christ over and over again. Nonetheless we need to follow in the footsteps of these men, allowing ourselves to be inspired by their generosity, their trust and their freedom.

What is ultimately amazing in the Gospel scene of the call of Peter, Andrew, James and John is that Jesus does not promise them personal salvation or happiness or success. He simply commissions them for others, for the service of their brothers and sisters in humanity.

Jesus does not attract us to himself in order to keep us jealously for himself. When Jesus calls us, it is always a call to be with him and for all others. There is nothing individualistic in our Christian vocation. We simply cannot fulfil our vocation on our own. And here the two small words “at once” which have guided our reflection are still relevant, we must ask: are we ready to serve our brothers and sisters at once?

In our families, in our society and in our Churches, are we willing to tackle the real questions and to look for Gospel-inspired solutions at once or do we procrastinate and distract ourselves with false questions?

Since we find ourselves in the middle of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we have to remind ourselves that, two thousand years ago, Jesus said: “When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.” (Mt 5:23-24) and yet here we are celebrating and partaking in the Sacrament of the Eucharist while the Body of Christ remains unreconciled.

We have to acknowledge that we are far from having given immediate answer to Jesus’ command. I do not think that it is just a question of the need for time for the penny to drop! There is a lot of pride and laziness on our part. This explains our slowness to give answer to Christ’s call. We do not seem to really bother about the present situation of division which plagues Christianity and we may give the impression that we have settled cosily into it.

At once the four apostles left everything, their family, the security of their job, their hometown in order to follow Jesus. In regard to Christian unity, but also in regard to evangelisation, justice and peace, theological research, lay ministry, we need to retrieve from the past the enthusiasm and the generosity of the apostles who, at once, acted upon the words of the Lord.

Martin Luther King reminds us: “We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. (...) Procrastination is still the thief of time. (...) We must move past indecision to action.” (04.04.1967) “This is no time for apathy or complacency. This is a time for vigorous and positive action.” (1958)