

Readings

Is 8:23–9:3
Ps 27:1, 4, 13-14
1 Cor 1:10-13, 17
Mt 4:12-23

Andrés G. Niño, O.S.A.
Cambridge, Massachusetts

A text from the story of the Apostles affirms that “in God we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). But one wonders how this translates into an experience of faith, how this becomes a reality in our relationship with God. Today’s gospel gives us a glimpse into it while Jesus, passing by, speaks just a couple of words to some people and they followed him. A biblical “whispering sound” made by one “who walks on the wings of the wind” (Ps 103: 4). The Master chooses his disciples in the best ancient tradition: “You did not choose me, I chose you.” A voice that is heard in the heart so deeply meaningful that made them abandon what they have at hand and follow. It is all about a call and a response. But something important takes place at this moment and not by mere chance. The power of the word and free will of the disciples is at play in this primordial exchange between God and two men named Simon and Andrew. A rather mysterious and intriguing event of momentous consequences.

The call is an invitation and a challenge. Did they know Jesus? Does he have plans for them? There are no explanations, as if the beginning of this story is drawn from the heart of God’s wisdom and left purposely unfinished. Maybe for us to fill in our names; to play with memory and imagination at reconstructing one from our own experience. But we feel compelled to ask: Is this calling always so clear and the response given always so firm? Some of us, may have experienced

nothing more than a moment of inspiration, an unexpected surge of inner strength to move on, certain deep knowing or sense of connection with the divine. More often, admittedly, we are deaf to such promptings because of the “tumult of the unquiet.” Perhaps we are being called but we are spiritually “far away,” in sheer dispersion, and cannot hear.

Augustine tells us about such experience in his personal story. But he also shares his profound conviction that God draws the human to himself (*Conf.* I, 1), and that the life of grace can include moral struggle and spiritual darkness. They are tenets of Christian spirituality that help us to explore the implications of today’s gospel. God is seeking us even when we are not seeking him. Augustine admits that we are just a small portion of God’s creation carrying about the signs of our mortality. But we are not left out of the possibility of an encounter and communion with God. Some may be called in the way Simon and Andrew were called -as if waiting to be touched in their own deep faithful disposition- while many others are questioning, struggling to see and hear, to comprehend the mystery of themselves and God. Augustine was one of them. That is why he insisted that we ought to seek, knock on the door and call upon the Lord.

We know that the call of the disciples was geared towards their participation in the redemptive mission carried on by the One who called them. He came to announce good news, a time of grace and true freedom. And he called to follow and join him as disciples and friends, raising a hope for all people of good will. The words of the old prophecy quoted by Matthew in his narrative must have been somehow in the mind of the disciples: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light” (Is 9:1). Those fishermen must have made a connection with the surprising appearance of the man walking by the Sea of Galilee. They imagined that to be counted, to be part of something greater than themselves, was worth the walk along with him.

This encounter in today's Gospel is astonishing in its simplicity. Such radical trust, like love, occurs in the innermost recesses of a person and we can see the implications of the process only with great effort, and often not very clearly. And now we know that following the Lord is under the risk of losing rather than gaining, experiencing hardships, rejections, and hostility. Perhaps swept away and oppressed by the forces of darkness. As it happens these days, not only within ourselves but outside as well, in our own church or community. Fearful people hold back because of all these dangers. They retreat or become silent when there is a chance to affirm their faith.

The power of God's grace in a disciple's life will be revealed only to those who accept the call. Believers will handle the reality and pressures of "the evil one." Those who trust and embrace purposefully the challenge of responding to the call will experience a profound transformation: fishermen became apostles, witnesses of a "new teaching" and men of courage. Zacchaeus, Matthew, the Samaritan woman, they all change dramatically. What distinctively marks a disciple and his life is the radical trust in the one who is calling. It takes a person from where he or she was before into the unknown, a true "leap of faith" into the biblical realm where infinite possibilities are safeguarded in a covenant: "Commit to the Lord your way; trust in him and he will act" (Ps 37:5); "The Lord is my light and my help, whom shall I fear? [...] though war break out against me even then would I trust" (Ps 27:1,3). It is also the experience of Jesus, in some dramatic moments of his own life and witnessed by his disciples.

Augustine was one that, at first, could not hear the call because he was "strange to himself" and away from God. Then he struggled to gain freedom of the bondage of his will and to be able to walk after Christ. But he could only move forward with a clear purpose when he resolved to surrender to the will of God: "to reach the journey's end was nothing else but to want to go there, but

to want it valiantly and with all my heart" (*Conf.* VIII, 8, 19). He had also heard that voice calling him "in many ways," and finally responded: "I love you, Lord, with no doubtful mind but with absolute certainty. You pierced my heart with your word, and I fell in love with you" (*Conf.* X, 6.8). The mystery of the call and the response, and of the relationship between God and human being, is at the heart of a radical faith and resolves in true love. It may take a lifetime of discipleship to keep it aflame. But as the Master said, it is "the only thing that really matters" (Lk. 10:41-42).

We also have been called. What is the story of our response?