

‘And He said to them, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Immediately they left their nets and followed Him.’

1] Immediately they followed Him, it says. This must strike us as very peculiar at first: this sudden decision, on the spur of the moment, on a whim, perhaps? The first called of the disciples appear to abandon everything, all at once, and follow the man from Nazareth.

2] We are given no particular reason why they should do this in the text of St Matthew’s gospel. Yet we do know from elsewhere that these fishermen on the Sea of Galilee were already followers of John the Baptist; that they, like many others, were caught up in an expectation that the Messiah was on his way, that he would soon appear among them. St John tells us that it was Andrew who had brought Peter to Jesus. Here, perhaps, in Matthew we have the decisive moment when they decide that the time has come to abandon the fishing nets for a while and enter upon a spiritual journey of discovery.

3] And that discovery will certainly come to be made by Peter, at a place called Caesarea Philippi, when he confesses Jesus to be indeed the Christ. But the interesting part in this story of the first-called disciples, is the use of that word immediately. St Matthew’s gospel uses the word nineteen times; St Luke, eighteen. St John, less in a hurry, a leisurely seven times only. But St Mark, the shortest gospel, uses immediately a frantic thirty-six times. But this is more than just a way of keeping the narrative moving along, of keeping the pace going. Words in the gospels are used by all four evangelists with great economy; there is no space wasted upon empty verbiage.

4] The point here is not a reckless abandon, or some ill-considered decision to be regretted ever after. This immediate is a realisation that the time is right; this is the moment to be seized. Elsewhere Christ tells us to be aware of the cost of discipleship:

‘Whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it... Or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand?’ (Lk.14:27-31)

5] The disciples are indeed being invited to take up the cross, and there is no turning back until they reach the end. ‘No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.’ (Lk.9:62) So the immediacy, here, reveals that it is the right decision: if you seek salvation there can be no other choice.

6] But, of course, this is all under the providence of God. This immediate following of Christ is no irrational act. This is not the madness of crowds, blindly pursuing the latest sensation, conforming to what others do. But it was those very crowds that these disciples are called to gather in. ‘When He saw the multitudes,’ St Matthew tells us later on. ‘He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, “The harvest truly is plentiful, but the labourers are few.”’ (Matt.9:36-37)

7] The current generation, our contemporaries, have never had so many choices. The more economically developed the country, the more the people have choices to make: in politics, in opinions, in lifestyles, in entertainments, pursuits and ambitions, in philosophies and religions, in relationships, learning and personal development, in the elusive pursuit of happiness. Only, they seem, as ever, so discontented, so mentally tormented, like sheep having no shepherd.

10] So what of us, who have, as we sing, seen the true light, received the heavenly Spirit and have found the true faith? Our difficulty, our spiritual malaise, is so often that we try to compromise; we dip out toes in the water, as it were. Not so much immediate as sometime, someday, preferring to procrastinate or

perhaps compromise, weighing up the gospel against all the worldly wisdom we have acquired so far. Or perhaps, like those whom Elijah the prophet addressed in his day at the contest on Mount Carmel: 'How long will you falter between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him.' (I Kg.18:21) The book of Kings goes on to tell us that, in their shame, the people answered him not a word.

11] There are those who found faith in a moment of time, in a crisis, in a disaster, in a sudden challenge. The writer C. S. Lewis, an atheist once, found his faith whilst in the trenches of the First World War, while many around him were losing theirs. And the Great Paul, bent on destroying the followers of The Way, was struck physically blind for a time, until his spiritual enlightenment through the ministry of the disciple, Ananias. As St Luke tells us in the Acts of the Apostles: 'Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptised.' (Acts 9:18) Immediacy, once again!

12] We too are called to follow Christ immediately, in the here and now. Yet this will take preparation and being ready to respond. That is the point, throughout our life, of all our asceticism, our fasting at this season, our prayer, our giving in charity, living lightly, unencumbered, the abandoning of the nets that entrap us, like those former-fishermen, the apostles. Whether its attending to the state of our soul, ready for the time of our own departure from this life, which might be at any time; or whether awaiting in hope and longing for the Second Coming of Christ and the resurrection of the dead, which might be at any time, we strive to be ready, immediately.

13] We know this from the parables in the gospel: the wise and foolish virgins, the rich fool, the master going to a far country who commanded the doorkeeper to watch. 'Watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house is coming... lest, coming suddenly, he find you sleeping.' (Mk.13:35-36)

14] But in everyday life, as well, the same question, the same summons, is addressed to us: do we do the will of God or do we

follow our own when there is a conflict? Which do we immediately choose? 'Thy will be done; Thy kingdom come,' we pray. 'On earth as it is in heaven.' But we are that earth where His will must be done. Readily, immediately even, we are eager to send up our prayers, asking of God in our need that our will be done. How much more then, as souls that love Christ, as servants and handmaids of Christ, should we leap to do His will?

15] But the soul that delays deludes itself if it thinks that it has made a free decision. It is still bound, still caught in the nets. Ruled by the passions, it is caught in the webs of its own habitual sins. Such a soul still wants to bargain with itself; needs yet to negotiate with the Old Adam as it cannot bare the thought of letting go. It is as if he wants to be known as a follower of Christ, but not at the cost of his own will. In short, he has not learned to deny himself or made the discovery that true freedom is repentance and that in the way of God lies the soul's authentic destiny.

14] Referring to the Law in the Old Testament, St Paul, in the epistle today says that even there, 'It is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God but the doers of the Law are justified.' And that when, the nations do by nature the things contained in the Law they show the work of the Law written in their hearts [cf. Rom.2:14-16].

15] Peter and Andrew, and the sons of Zebedee were called, invited to become fishers of men, workers in the great in-gathering of the faithful. It is those who know the will of God and do it, even immediately, that make spiritual progress in this life, whilst those who delay: who knows where they will be come the Judgement?