

Humble, Patient, Willing to Take Risks Third Sunday in Ordinary Time/A
January 26, 2014 10:45 AM **Is 8:23—9:3**; 1 Cor 10:13, 17; **Mt 4:12-23** (Jesus is still calling people today to follow him, to turn their lives over to him, to let him be the lead and the guide.)

Today's gospel story from Matthew tells us of the bittersweet **beginnings of Jesus' ministry on earth**. They are bittersweet because his cousin, John the Baptist, had been hauled into prison for opposing King Herod. But this was an opportunity for Jesus now to step up to the plate without competing with John the Baptist, so it was good from that viewpoint.

Matthew recalls the joyous prophecy from Isaiah that you heard read in the first reading about the land of Zebulun and Naphtali, which is where Jesus grew up, **Galilee**. Isaiah prophesied that **eventually the light would shine in that country** that had been for so many years buffeted and bullied by neighboring countries. That buffeting and bullying is still going on in the Middle East. But Matthew is pointing to the light that was Christ, Jesus living in the midst, a kind of salvation, but not what perhaps people expected. **Jesus is the light and he proclaims that the kingdom of heaven**, the endpoint of all prophecy, is now present: at hand, close enough to be touched **for anyone who really wants its power**. The problem is the power of this kingdom over a person's life was **dependent on that person's willingness to accept it and to believe and to change all kinds of things**, especially change the way a person expected God to work and thought about the really important things in life. All of this is connected to what we today call our faith.

Immediately Jesus, realizing that this job, this endeavor that he is engaging in, requires a lot of helpers, **he goes out to get helpers**. The kind of people he picks tells us something of the mission. He picks fishermen, and he says, "I will make you fishers of men." What does this tell us of Jesus' own mission and work? Well, first of all, fishermen are humble people. Now it's true they may brag at times, but actually they are humble about being fishermen. It doesn't take a great deal of expertise to be a fisherman, but it does take something: it takes patience. So this is what **Jesus wants, men who are humble but patient**. Being a coworker with Jesus in the vineyard of the Lord does not require sophistication or a great education, although that's nice. But it does require patience and **knowing how to get out of the way** because this work is not the work of the worker; **it's the work of God**. The worker is just there to help.

But there is something even more significant, I think, about the choice of these men because ancient society worked and was built on tradition, and families kept themselves together, fed themselves, by working together in family businesses. **These fishermen were family businesses, and sons always followed in the footsteps of their fathers**. No pious Jew would ever abandon his father and the family business to go follow some stranger, unless something really extraordinary was going on, and that is something we have to see here. These men were not just ordinary fishermen. **They were fishermen that had expectations**. They were looking for something from God, and somehow something about Jesus told them to go, to follow. So that tells us something of what **kind of qualities all Jesus' followers really need: humility, patience, and a willingness to take risks**, to leave

certain things behind, to move with a power that is greater than human tradition and human society. We could say faith is not for the faint of heart.

Jesus' message, which he begins to preach here, is one that **focuses on this very idea of changing the way one looks at things**. We don't know what he really said in Aramaic, which is what the people spoke, but we have the Greek New Testament and the word is "**metanoia**." The English translation is "repent for the kingdom of God is at hand." The Greek word really means "stretch your mind"—**stretch your mind—the kingdom of God is at arm's reach**.

This message of new thinking, stretching one's thinking, ran into trouble interfacing with Jewish faith, naturally because—why? Faith is about tradition, authority, established truthfulness—you can't change that. But that is exactly what Jesus asked for, to change that, **to change the way people look at everything, including most importantly God**. So to follow Jesus all of us really **have to be willing to rethink our convictions and certainties in the light of what Jesus actually teaches and in light of the wisdom of the Holy Spirit**. Our thinking cannot be just a product of ourselves or our culture or our families or our upbringing. We need the Holy Spirit to help us sort out what's what, to help us see what is really important, what is really of value. **The saints are great examples** of this. The saints never put their faith on a shelf where it could just stay. No, the saints worked at putting all their beliefs into practice, deepening their understanding and allowing the gospel message to form them into new people. **That's what actually the gospel does: it forms us into new people. Some call this "ongoing conversion."**

I believe **Jesus is still calling people today to follow him, to turn their lives over to him, to let him be the lead and the guide**. That's what it means, after all, to say, "Jesus is Lord." It means we let Jesus be our companion, our guide, our lead, our teacher. If everything is up to us, then we are Lord. If everything that goes on in my life is what I want, then I'm Lord. "So we can confess with our lips that Jesus is Lord," but even more importantly we need to process that with our choices.