

Jesus Sends Us to Teach and Heal

Fr. Thomas Rosica, CSB

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When the Gospels relate to us the call extended by Jesus to his young disciples and apostles, it is always done in a very compassionate way. Jesus looks upon those whom he calls; he loves them, challenges them and calls them to be something they could hardly fathom!

Today's Gospel (Mark 6:7-13) is about the formation of those who will eventually spread the Gospel to the ends of the earth. Mark sees the teaching and work of the apostles as an extension of Jesus' teaching and work. In Mark's story, the preparation for the mission of the Twelve is seen in the call of the first disciples to be fishers of men (Mark 1:16-20), then of the Twelve set apart to be with Jesus and to receive authority to preach and expel demons (3:13-19). Now they are given the specific mission to exercise that authority in word and power as representatives of Jesus during the time of their formation.

In Mark's call story, Jesus does not mention any prohibition to visit pagan territory and to enter Samaritan towns. These differences indicate a certain adaptation to conditions in and outside of Palestine and suggest in Mark's account a later activity in the Church. For the rest, Jesus required of his apostles a total dependence on God for food and shelter (Cf. Mark 6:35-44; 8:1-9). Remaining in the same house as a guest (6:10), rather than moving to another offering greater comfort avoided any impression of seeking advantage for oneself and prevented dishonor to one's host. Why does Jesus tell the apostles to "travel light" with little or no provision? He wants his disciples to be dependent on him and not on themselves. He promises to work through and in each person called for his glory. The significance of shaking the dust off one's feet served as testimony against those who rejected the call to repentance.

Help or hindrance?

One of the frequent themes of Mark's Gospel is the ignorance of the disciples. When we read the whole Gospel, we realize that the disciples are as much a hindrance as a help to Jesus. They do not understand Jesus' words or support him in his mission. Repeatedly Jesus rebukes them for their inability to see and comprehend and for their hardness of heart. But when the disciples misunderstand Jesus and in other ways fail him, they are doing more than simply trying his patience. They are serving as agents of testing. As ones who "think the things of humans," rather than the things of God, they cannot comprehend that the straight and narrow path lying before Jesus must necessarily end at the cross. And so they act in ways that threaten to lead Jesus astray.

Many times we find ourselves asking, "Why did Mark portray the disciples in such a bad light?" But Mark's earliest readers would have focused not on Mark's literary strategies but on the events depicted in the narrative. They would have asked something like this: "What could it mean that the disciples whom we know as great leaders were so weak and acted so shamefully?" And the answer to that question would have been obvious: God had opened the eyes of the disciples, and had transformed them from ones who misunderstood and tested Jesus into worthy servants, even fearless leaders. There is hope for us! These famous call stories were remembered by Christians who knew the reality of their own weakness and failure, yet who also trusted in the presence of the Lord who triumphed over fear.

In Jesus' Name

What kind of authority and power does the Lord want us to exercise on his behalf? Jesus gave his apostles both the power and the authority to speak and to act in his name. He commanded them to do the works that he did: to cast out evil spirits, to heal, and to speak the word of God, the good news of the Gospel, which they received from Jesus. When Jesus spoke of power and authority he did something unheard of. He wedded power and authority with love and humility. The "world" and the "flesh" seek power for selfish gain. Jesus teaches us to use it for the good of our neighbor. Following Jesus is a risk, as every new way of life is. Each of us is called to teach as Jesus taught and to heal boldly and compassionately as he did.

Law, Prophets and Writings

In light of the first reading from the book of the prophet Amos (7:12-15) I would also like to offer some reflections on Jesus in relation to the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings of the Old Testament. On the one hand, Jesus knows the Law perfectly and observes it with devotion. On the other hand, however, He shows Himself perfectly free with regard to the Law. He wishes to give the authentic interpretation of the Law. He goes so far as to declare Himself the new lawgiver, with an authority equal to that of God. He Himself is the fulfillment of the Law (Cf. Romans 10:4).

Jesus also shows that He is the genuine continuation of the prophets in His message and His life. Like them, He proclaims faith in the "God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob" (Matthew 2:32). He defends the rights of God and of the poor (cf. Matthew 11:20-24). On the other hand, Jesus does not hesitate to declare Himself greater than all of them. He is superior to them, not only in the prophetic line, but He is the first, as the origin and source of all prophetic inspiration.

He is greater than Jonah and Solomon (Cf. Matthew 12:41-43; Luke 11:31-32). He is greater than Moses and he is first of all the prophets before John (John 1:15), Moses (John 6:46) and Abraham (John 8:56-58). And it is important to note that His primacy is not only temporal, but existential. His "before" is infinite, because it is eternal: "Abraham, your father, rejoiced to see my day; he saw it and was glad. [...] Amen, amen, I say to you, before Abraham came to be, I Am" (John 8:56-58).

Jesus also presents Himself as a fulfillment of the wisdom literature in the Old Testament. Jesus fulfills the Law and the Prophets by embodying this awareness in Himself: He embodies the way and reforms it by the witness He gives throughout His life, and even in His death. There is a radical change in values, as if a new creation would emerge from a creation undergoing a major upheaval.

By His death, Jesus explains the apparent contradiction of these values in the wisdom literature, and opens the path which had seemed to become as impasse for humankind. For those who follow Jesus, and hopefully that is each one of us, we must walk in his footsteps, enduring all of his misunderstanding, suffering, and even death, in order to truly be his disciples. The more we probe the depths of the very Scriptures which he fulfilled with his life, the more we will become like him.

Extended call

Spend some time this week reflecting on how the Lord has called you to be a disciple. In what ways have you felt the personal call of Christ? How does Christ make a difference in your life? What has his call demanded of you? What experiences or people in your life have been instrumental in deepening your faith? Is it possible to be a committed disciple of Jesus, yet still experience weakness and failure? In what ways can you, as a disciple of Jesus, share in his mission of teaching and healing today? To whom are you being sent, to teach and to heal?