

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jan 22, 2023

“Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men.”

There is something I often wonder about as a priest. And when I tell you, I imagine you will be surprised. But I don't think my concern is unique. My gut tells me that many members of the clergy (in all Christian denominations) feel the exact same way. And what I often wonder about is this:

Is there even one more person on this earth who believes in Jesus because of me?

And before you decide to come up to me after Mass and assure me that the answer to my question is, “Yes! Absolutely!” I want you to really think about it, think about how hard it is to really know the answer to that question. Sure, I've been a priest for the past 31 years. Sure, I've been at people's bedsides, and have officiated at their weddings especially in my homeland Ghana, and have counseled them, and have baptized their children. All good stuff. But do I really know if any non-believer has come to believe because of something I did or something I said? I'm honestly not sure. And it bothers me.

“Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men.”

One of the most difficult aspects of walking the journey of faith is often not being able to see the fruits of our actions. Oh, that's not completely true. I'm only speaking about the GOOD fruits of our actions, the ways we build people up and help give them hope, that is, how we encourage and support them on life's journey. The BAD fruits we bring about, well, those are usually pretty evident. We sometimes hurt people. We alienate them. We judge them and criticize them and push them away. We use them for our own gain or pleasure. These sorts of fruits are usually in plain sight, illuminated for all to see.

But the positive fruits? The good fruits? The holy fruits? Well, those are often a little more mysterious, often a little more hidden, a little more shrouded in the deepest recesses of a person's being. And not being able to see those things plainly can be a challenge, can be a source of discouragement. So what has a person to do?

Come after me

Notice the order. Jesus doesn't say, "Go tell everyone about me and then come back and follow me." Rather he FIRST tells them to follow, to come - and THEN their identity as fishers of men will be realized. First the following and then the fruits - not the other way around.

Jesus really knew what he was doing (even though his precise mission came more clearly into focus as he grew in wisdom and age). He knew that what he was asking of them could only come about if they had first established a relationship with him, only if they first accompanied him, only if they first built a friendship with him, only if they were willing to forge a kind of intimacy with him. If they could do that, if they were WILLING to do that, the rest would take care of itself. The good fruits would be there, even if it might not be obvious to them. It was following that was important. It was trust that was important. It was authentic faithfulness that was important - a faithfulness directed not simply toward family or friends or community, but to him. To Jesus. Completely. Without condition or reservation or hesitation. Come after me

And that doesn't necessarily give me complete consolation or confidence. After all, I am a sinner. For every right and good thing I do, I seem to mess up two or three times. For every person I build up - there is probably someone I have torn apart through my pettiness, or jealousy, or indifference, or selfishness - that is, through my sin. Yet, what keeps me moving forward, keeps me struggling to stay on the path, is knowing that I am not alone. Every believer, from the Apostles down to the present day, has had to wonder about the very thing I'm wondering about.

And yet somehow they were able to change the world. (With the help of God, course!)

And so, while we might not be able to always see the fruits of our actions, we are able to see the seeds we're using, see the nets we are casting, see the bait we are using - whether or not we even know or understand that we're in the fishing business at all. Do I cast nets of love wherever I go, or do I toss something else instead? Is there the bait of mercy and kindness and compassion that precedes me wherever I go, attracting people to the ONE who is the source of all those things? Or do I seem to sow more discord than harmony, more cynicism than hope, more fear than trust, more selfishness than kindness?

And so my dear friends in Christ, if certainty is what we want, if perfect clarity is what we require, then, well, we've picked the wrong religion, signed on the wrong dotted line. But if we can convince ourselves that it is simply faithful following that is the key, that is, the embracing of all Jesus holds dear - and are willing to place our feet in his footprints and go wherever he leads us - we will never have to worry whether or not we have truly made a difference, never have to wonder if we've failed, or if our efforts have been in vain.

Jesus will make sure the fruits are there. And in the end, that's all that matters.