

Trinity 5

I take as my text today from St. Matthew's Gospel:

"And when they had brought their ships to land, they forsook all, and followed him."

"Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable unto Thee, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer."

Today, as we celebrate the Fifth Sunday after Trinity, I cannot help but think back a few weeks ago when we celebrated Independence Day, the Fourth of July. For me the whole month of July is one celebration of the Declaration of Independence. Now, there is good reason to connect the Gospel passage for this Sunday with the celebration of July Fourth — both are centered on "commitment."

We all most certainly remember the commitment our founding fathers made. They were willing to sacrifice everything, including their own lives, to build a nation where we would be free to worship God without persecution; where we would be individually responsible for our own success or failure; where we could participate in building the future of this country and sharing the ideals of freedom with the entire world; a nation to be a light, a beacon shining for the world to see.

They passed that commitment on to each succeeding generation.

We see not only a parallel but the basis for that self-sacrificing commitment in the Church — from the Apostles, the early disciples, the converts of the first century, through the early Church Fathers up to the twenty-first century — a commitment that required a willingness to sacrifice everything, including one's own life.

In our Gospel passage today, from St. Matthew, we see that commitment take life: the commitment to follow Jesus Christ, wholly and freely, and to dedicate one's self to the building of His Church; a commitment passed on by the Apostles to succeeding generations.

St. Luke recounts the story of the miraculous draught of fishes as he tells of the calling of the first of Jesus' disciples.

Without hesitation, St. Luke tells us, Simon Peter, James, and John leave their work and their families to follow Jesus, an absolute commitment, freely made. Astounding by today's standards!

How could anyone be so committed? Jesus was in the early stages of His ministry, and though His fame was spreading, it was still very much localized. How then were these men able to leave everything and follow Him? And could we do the same thing ourselves today?

In each instance described in the Gospels, Jesus issued the call, and the person dropped everything, right then, and followed Him.

From what we are able to discern from studying and comparing the four Gospels, Peter, James, and John most probably were already acquainted with Jesus, and were somewhat prepared, maybe anticipating His final beckoning.

The call itself, punctuated with the miracle of the draught of fishes, an over-abundant catch of fish straining the nets to the breaking point, becomes an obvious and purposeful illustration to provide insight for a later age.

As St. Luke relates it, Simon Peter realizes with the miraculous catch of fish that Jesus represents something more than just a teacher or Rabbi, and he falls down before our Lord in awe and fear.

And Jesus said unto Simon, Fear not; from henceforth thou shalt catch men.

Peter, along with James and John, responded immediately:

And when they had brought their ships to land, they forsook all, and followed him.

And who were these men accepting the call of our Lord? If we look at what we know of the background of the Apostles, all indications are that none of them was really poor, or uneducated.

The family of James and John was well off enough to have servants; John, well known to the high priests, also had a house in Jerusalem; and St. Matthew was also known to be well off, after all, he was a tax collector.

That they performed manual labor was considered honorable among the Jews of that time, and it was quite common for the sons of the wealthy to be taught trades. Another, and later example, was St. Paul, who was a scholar from a wealthy family and by trade a tentmaker.

In all, it was a misconception that the disciples were "unlearned and ignorant men," of low social position.

St. Peter, when he left his boat on the shore of Lake Gennesaret, did not lay aside his nets but changed them; he became as did the others, a fisher of men.

The Church itself is like the fisherman's nets, just catching a different kind of fish. Nets become tattered at times, requiring some mending, just like the Church that at times needs some restoration.

The Christian fisherman, as the lesson teaches, is to put out into the deep waters of the Gentiles, where he will win a rich harvest of souls.

There have been many throughout the history of the Church who have received that unmistakable call and have forsaken everything to answer. From the early Church Fathers down to the present, the way has been paved with commitment, devotion, even martyrdom, in response to God's beckoning.

Even in our mother country, England, there were those who stood up to authority in defense of the Faith and paid the ultimate price: Becket, John Fisher, Sir Thomas More, even the author of our first Book of Common Prayer, Archbishop Cranmer, to name just few of many.

There are so many examples in the Church's history of those who have emulated the Apostles. And for each of the Saints we honor in the Church as indicated on the Church Calendar, there are hundreds, thousands more who have gone unrecognized by history while truly submitting to God's will.

And so many suffered horrendously for their faith.

Would you endure imprisonment, or torture, even death for your faith?

There are hundreds, even thousands in the Middles East and Africa who every day are enduring imprisonment, torture, and death for their faith — even members of the Anglican Catholic Church in countries such as the Sudan and the Congo. I have heard first-hand accounts of the atrocities and suffering.

How important is faith to us?

Each of us during our life receives a call from God. It is not necessarily the call to be a priest or a nun; nonetheless, we each are called to service to God.

How do we respond?

Do we respond without hesitation, as did the Apostles? What sacrifices are we willing to make to honor that call? How do we recognize the call?

For most of us, even from the earliest times in the history of the Church, there is reasonable, sometimes considerable, hesitation in responding to God's call.

Much of that hesitation stems from uncertainty: first, are we indeed being called to something; second, understanding what we are being called to; and third, accepting the sacrifices that may be required.

Aside from the clerical or the religious life, there are many callings in the life of God's Church; serving on the vestry of a parish; serving as a lay reader, an acolyte, or a member of an Altar Guild; being a spokesperson for the parish; simply attending Church and participating in the life of the Parish.

Whatever we do in God's service may, indeed, be our calling, however simple, however lofty; whether we perceive it as a great sacrifice or hardly any sacrifice at all.

Essential, though, is that our response be of our own free will. It must come from the heart, from our love of God, and from our love for all His creation.

Imagine if we were in the Apostles' place. Could we have left everything, family, friends, vocation, and wealth to follow Him?

What about today, knowing the whole story? Could we, would we lay aside our nets and follow Him?

What are we willing to do?

Jesus Christ has given us the foundation, the instructions, the tools and materials; the Apostles and early Church Fathers have built upon that foundation; the saints and martyrs over the centuries have labored relentlessly; and so now it is our time, our turn.

The most immediate call we have as Christians, as creatures of God's making, is to worship our Creator. That is truly the easy part of our calling.

In our small Parish, we can join together in the corporate worship of God in the tradition we have inherited through our English Church roots. It is a tradition that has retained the fundamentals of early Church worship; it incorporates the fullness of worship: the liturgical, the preaching of God's Word, and the reading of Holy Scripture.

It is a tradition that brings us into communion with God by the very offering of ourselves to him in our worship. We become living sacrifices, joining ourselves to our Lord and Saviour as He offers the eternal sacrifice in Heaven.

If we accept that calling through our own free will, then we must put ourselves to the task at hand: worshipping God in the manner that has come down to us from our Lord through the Apostles and their successors and continued in the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.

When we accept that call from God, something else enters into our lives: the three-fold gift of God's Love, Mercy, and Grace. These three are essential to the Christian Life. And they are truly gifts. There is nothing we can do to earn any one of them.

Our Parish is a family, a family in Christ, and, as a family, we are called to care for each other; to support each other when the going is difficult, when life's road gets bumpy; and to rejoice with each other when the times are good.

If we accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, we also accept that we are willing participants in our own salvation; and that requires commitment.

Not a one-time commitment, or a some-time commitment, but a full-time commitment. And not just at our convenience. It must not become a stumbling block to our own salvation.

Our commitment to God, to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, is something that can not be compartmentalized: religious commitment here, secular commitment there, and family commitment over there.

It is one commitment that affects everything we do in our daily living.

And that brings us back to the reality of today, for we may in our own lifetimes come face-to-face with our commitment to faith, to Jesus Christ, and be tested and tried.

Are we prepared? Can we emulate the saints of old in their commitment?

Indeed, can we even emulate our Founding Fathers?

While we may not perceive ourselves as receiving such definitive calls as did the Apostles, as did St. Paul, or so many others, we, nonetheless, have our several callings, requiring a commitment on our part, perhaps even a calling to set right what has gone amiss in our own country.

Regardless of the calling, it is through the Love and Grace of God, and through the Body and Blood of Christ that we are enabled and strengthened in fulfilling commitment as members of the Body of Christ, and through which we find eternal life.