

2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)
(1Samuel 3:3-10.19 / John 1:35-42)
17.01.2021
To walk

The Gospel reading heard this morning shows Jesus acting and speaking for the first time in St John's Gospel. What is recorded here are the opening words and actions of his mission.

One of the first things we are told about Jesus is that he walks. This fact is less trivial than it seems. In the Gospels, Jesus walks a lot, what this displays is more than a question of personal style or a concern to keep fit. The wayfaring of Jesus has a theological significance. Jesus does not engage in aimless wandering but in a directed progression towards a fulfilment: the fulfilment of his identity and mission. What was true for Jesus is true for each one of us.

We are not a settled people. As the New Testament authors put it, we are "aliens and exiles" (1P 2:11), "strangers and foreigners on the earth (...) seeking a homeland" (Heb 11:13-14). We are a pilgrim people. If we also need to be rooted and grounded, this is in Christ who is the way (cf. Jn 14:6).

The image of a pilgrim engaged on a journey is a very appropriate one to describe what it means to be and to become a Christian. Samuel, Andrew and Peter were called to insert their steps into the long flow of men and women who, as one of our hymns expresses it, "sought the trackless footprints of God's feet" (Stanbrook 72). God called these disciples, and he calls us today, to walk the path of life.

Today in our communities, among the many challenges we have to face I would like to mention two. The first is that, outside our Churches, there are those who consider Christianity to be irrelevant because they see Christians as a group of people who are stuck in the mud, bogged down in old ways, prisoners of an outdated institution. The second is that, within our Churches, there are many who, because they feel insecure and threatened by society, want to make Christianity the guardian of so-called traditional values; they long for a return to the good old days. Both groups are misguided and miss the point.

Like Jesus we are called to walk. In 1961, the New Delhi Report of the third Assembly of the World Council of Churches used a powerful biblical image: "The Pilgrim Church (...) goes forth boldly as Abraham did into the unknown future, not afraid, glad to dwell in the tent of perpetual adaptation, looking to the city whose builder and maker is God." (in A. Dulles, *Models...*, p. 112)

Like Abraham, we are called to advance boldly towards an uncharted future, and so to be regularly confronted with new scenery, unexpected meetings, unforeseen experiences. If we want to follow Christ, we have to be willing to change often the ways in which we look at the world, the ways in which we relate to one another and to God.

As St Paul reminds us, a central element of our Christian faith is the humble acknowledgement that we have not yet obtained what we long for and have not yet reached the goal (Phil 3:12). As Churches and as persons we are called to tend towards the realisation of who we are supposed to be according to God's desire. We are a pilgrim people, we are called by God to be the people of the Way (cf. Ac 24:14).

The emphasis here is as much on the word *pilgrim* as on the word *people* because we do not walk on our own, we are not alone on the way. Samuel and Peter needed others in

order to hear, discern and answer God's call in their lives. In the same way, we need one another in order to follow Christ and walk in his footsteps. To belong to the Church, to walk with fellow believers, is not optional to our Christian identity. To follow Christ is not a solitary walk, a journey that we can enjoy alone, ignoring others, relying just on our own strength.

The Gospel asks more of us than an occasional foray into the unknown. The call to follow Christ wherever he goes, the spirituality of the journey assimilates us to the poor, the meek, those who hunger for righteousness and who are even persecuted for it (cf. Mt 5:1-12). It is a demanding programme which engages the whole of our lives. Over and over again, we have to recommit ourselves to the journey "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead" (Phil 3:13).

It is obvious that some of us will never travel very far geographically. As Christians our walk is not measured first in miles outside ourselves. For us, to journey implies that we are ready to open our eyes, minds and hearts to new horizons which make us grow in the knowledge of who we are and who God is. This is an inner experience. The new horizons to which we are called are not very far from us: they call us to cross the boundaries of religion, race and politics, the barriers of gender and sexual orientation, to step out in the land of forgiveness, dialogue, respect, in truth and love.

Sometimes the walk looks like a long trek or an adventurous safari, and sometimes – yes sometimes – like an enjoyable cruise. What matters is not the distance or not even whether it is easy or difficult but the result: what is important is that we are changed. Like St Peter who receives a new name, the Christian walk must change us, there must be a shift within us, not necessarily an earthquake, but something that makes us humbler and more real, more human, more conformed to Christ.

We do not know what the next step will entail, what change the Lord expects from us as he says to you and to me, every day and many times a day: "Come and see". Yet we can be certain that at the end of our pilgrimage, the Lord will welcome us, wipe every tear from our eyes and make all things new (cf. Rev 21:4-5).

So today as the Lord calls us saying to all of us: "Stand up and walk" (Jn 5:8), let us courageously walk in love (2Jn 1:6).