

24 January 2021

Writings: Followers

Jesus said to Simon and Andrew "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people" (Mark 1:17).

It is said there are two kinds of people in life: leaders and follower. Leaders are usually seen as aggressive, charismatic and ambitious people out to change the world and make a name for themselves. Followers are often perceived as passive, less confident and apathetic individuals who conform to rather than challenge situations and fall in behind the strong. Yet, the former are only leaders if they can get people to follow them. They must have a clear vision of what they want to do, the ability to communicate it effectively to others and then show by their words and deeds how their vision is credible. Yet, the relationship between leaders and followers is often more mysterious than it first appears.

In today's Gospel, Jesus calls Simon and Andrew to be his first followers. Mark's story of how Christ acquired his first disciples immediately followed the start of his earthly ministry. Like a good leader, Jesus had a clear vision "the time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of God has come near". He communicated effectively what individuals had to do "repent and believe in the good news". His future words and deeds would give credibility to that vision. However, there was no indication Peter, Andrew (and later) James and John heard Christ's message. So, what prompted their decision to leave the little security they had as fisherman to follow Jesus? Perhaps it was an act of God or that mysterious ability leaders have to draw individuals into a relationship which builds upon their hopes and aspirations for a better life. It might have been Mark's intention to show becoming a follower of Christ is a process which really can't be explained, like falling in love. You can't explain why you are in love or how you got there, you just know you are in love. Yet, being called to be a follower is one thing; remaining one is another. If Jesus had not shown how his vision had a real impact on the lives of people through his teachings and miracles (which Mark records next), the disciples would have likely wandered away.

Many of Christ's followers have had their faith tested by this pandemic. While a few have seen Covid 19 as divine punishment for sinfulness within our society, the overwhelming majority are struggling to keep themselves and their loved ones healthy or caring for them if they get sick. They feel uneasy when the virus strikes those who have taken all the precautions (social distancing, wearing a mask, washing hands often) suddenly and forcefully. They worry about how long this pandemic will last and if the vaccines developed will work. They are concerned about how bad the economic fallout from the pandemic will be. Many ask how could God allow this? Christ's message of the Kingdom of God coming near is fading from their consciousness.

Yet, as Mark's Gospel repeatedly shows, followers of Jesus failed in their efforts to be faithful to him. Today, we have our doubts about God's love or ability to care for us. We may at times lose faith and walk away from him. But then the health of someone we love with Covid 19 takes a turn for the better. Someone listens to us when we really have to talk. A neighbor does us a favor at time when we needed it. Somehow, we can see a little more clearly the vision Christ proclaimed. A leader's most important job is to throw someone a lifeline when their faith is slipping away. A follower's most important job is to catch the lifeline.

The relationship between real leaders and true followers is more complicated than many people realize. It is not just about some people being superior and others being subordinate. There is a something mysterious about how certain individuals are drawn to follow others and remain with them during difficult times. There is something equally mysterious about how some people can see clearly what needs to be done, get others to see it and then provide the support needed to keep the vision alive. When Peter, Andrew, James and John were first called by Jesus, they probably couldn't imagine the vision would include the Cross and what came after it; but it did.

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