

11th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Commissioning of the Twelve

1st Reading: Ex 19:2-6a

Psalm 10

2nd Reading: Rom 5:6-11

Gospel: Mt 9:36—10:8

"At the sight of the crowds, [Jesus'] heart was moved with pity for them because they were troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd."

Jesus was moved to the very depths of his being when he experienced people suffering. He commiserated with the people who were abandoned by their leaders whose main concern was keeping the letter of the law. There was no one to teach the people the spiritual meaning of life. They needed someone to teach them about the value of trial and suffering: that is part of being human, but it has transforming value. Through it, God is drawing us to himself and purifying us; he is making us more spiritual and disposed for union with God. God is with us; he loves us; he suffers with us; he supports us in our human struggles.

If we understand all of this, it is easier to bear the cross; we understand its meaning; it has value for us; that is what Jesus came to teach us through his becoming human like us.

So Jesus *"began to teach them many things"* (Mk 6:34). He acted to relieve the misery he saw in them; he proceeded to feed the multitude with five loaves and two fish. This is why Jesus left us the Mass: the first part is the liturgy of the word to teach us about the meaning of life; the second part is the liturgy of the Eucharist to nourish us with divine food to be able to bear with the trials of life.

Jesus expressed his ultimate compassion for suffering humanity through his passion, death, and resurrection. In this way, he could be with us and lead us, showing us the value of trial and the need to accept the Father's will. For the Father loves us and is bringing us to the Promised Land, the kingdom of God. Through suffering, he is gradually transforming us into spiritual, immortal beings.

Then Jesus said to his disciples, *"The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest."*

Even in Jesus' day, there was a need for more people to help with the spiritual harvest. So he appointed the twelve Apostles to assist him in ministering to the people—but it was only after spending all night in prayer that he called them (Lk 6:12-13).

God is the one who ultimately inspires people with sufficient faith, love, and zeal to be caught up in the kingdom of God and feel the urgency to tell others about it. So we need to ask God to call people into ministry. But those who are called need to be prepared and formed over the years for such a task. They need to be surrounded by an atmosphere of faith and prayer in family life. Only a community whose members nourish their faith through prayer, word, and Sacrament are apt to hear or accept the call to ministry.

"Then he summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits to drive them out and to cure every disease and every illness."

Just as there were twelve patriarchs at the head of the twelve tribes of Israel, so Jesus calls twelve men to lead the New Israel. He continues and brings to perfection the old. The New Testament grows out of the Old and brings it to completion.

Jesus shares his power over the devils with the Apostles. Some of the saints, such as John of the Cross and Teresa of Jesus, were keenly aware and wrote about the frequent influence and interference of the devil in our lives. So Jesus equips his church and its leaders with power over the devil. Perhaps the most common occasion that this power is exercised is in the Sacrament of Penance. People repent of sin and come to this Sacrament to meet Jesus and to be forgiven as well as to be freed from the power of the evil one. The Sacrament restores us to grace and the presence of God. The Church also blesses water as means for people to ward off the devil. Holy water forces him to leave.

Jesus was also concerned about leaving his church with power "to cure every disease and every illness". That is why he left a special Sacrament for the sick in the Church. Like the Apostles, who "...anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them" (Mk 6:13), so we in the Church today continue to have concern and minister to the sick. We continue the tradition narrated in Holy Scripture: *"Is anyone among you sick? He should summon the presbyters of the church, and they should pray over him and anoint [him] with oil in the name of the Lord, and the prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise him up. If he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven"* (Jms 5:13-15).

St. Matthew proceeds to tell us the names of the twelve "Apostles", that is, those who are "sent" by Jesus to continue his work in the Church that he is establishing: "first, Simon called Peter": It is significant that each of the four lists of the Apostles places Simon Peter as first and leader of the Apostles (see Mt 10:2, Mk 3:16, Lk 6:14, Acts 1:13). The meaning and importance of placing Peter first in each of the lists of the Apostles will become clearer later in Matthew's gospel. Then Jesus will say, *"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah...you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church..."* (Mt 16:17-18). Peter will become the principle of unity; he will hold the apostolic college together and be their spokesman (see Acts 15:7-12).

Jesus also called "his brother Andrew" to be an Apostle. You may remember that Andrew was originally a disciple of John the Baptist, who introduced him to Jesus (Jn 1:35-37). Andrew was so impressed with Jesus after spending an afternoon with him that he was immediately convinced that he was the Messiah. He then proceeded to tell his brother Simon and introduced him to Jesus, who changed his name to Cephas, which is translated Peter.

It is noteworthy that Simon and Andrew were simple men, fishermen by trade. Peter was a brash sort of individual. For example, he bragged, *"Even though all should have their faith shaken, mine will not be"* (Mk 14:29). And yet, he proceeded to deny Jesus three times (Mk 14:66-72). Nevertheless, Jesus continued to forgive and befriend Simon after he rose from the dead; he appeared to him (Lk 24:34), and confirmed his appointment of Peter as chief shepherd of his flock (Jn 21:15-17).

Despite Peter's sins and imperfections, he became a saint. Close association with Jesus enabled him to overcome his weaknesses. Jesus' love and grace can affect us the same way. We also can become Jesus' close friends and associates and transformed into saints.

The same can be said of James and John, who were called *"sons of thunder"* (Mk 3:17). For example, they wanted *"to call down fire from heaven to consume"* the Samaritans who refused to allow them to pass through their village (see Lk 9:52-54). Yet these two hot tempered brothers became great saints. Jesus' gentle spirit changed them; they overcame their angry disposition to such an extent that love began to rule their lives (see 1 Jn 4:7-12). Their spiritual transformation gives us hope that we, too, can overcome our passions by friendship with Jesus, whose grace enables us to overcome the elements of the world that are in us (Jn 16:33).

"Philip and Bartholomew" are named together. Perhaps because Philip introduced Jesus to him as *"...the one about whom Moses wrote in the law, and also the prophets..."* that is, the Messiah (Jn 1:45-46). Philip led him to meet Jesus so he could see for himself—only in this scene, his name appears as Nathaniel rather than Bartholomew.

The Apostle "Thomas", you will remember, is the one who was absent from the assembly when Jesus appeared to the rest of the Apostles on Easter Sunday. Thus, he was deprived of the faith given to those whose faith is supported in community. So he refused to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead. But a week later he joined his fellow Apostles when Jesus appeared to them again and dispelled all doubts from Thomas' mind. His exclamation, "My Lord and my God!" is the strongest expression in the Gospels of one who was convinced that Jesus is God incarnate. Jesus' manifestation in the Eucharist can banish our doubts too.

The other Apostle, "Matthew", abandoned his moneymaking profession to be able to be with Jesus in an exclusive way. In Jesus, he found a source of spiritual wealth in a way available nowhere else. He found in Jesus "something" that filled the emptiness with which wealth had formerly left him.

We pass over the other James and Thaddeus and Simon to end with Judas, who betrayed Jesus. We must not be surprised nowadays when priests go astray or fall away. Judas was with Jesus for about two and a half years. Jesus himself was not able to reach and change him after such close association with him. But Judas was apparently looking for an earthly kingdom and Messiah. He was also blinded from knowing Jesus personally by his love for money. We know this to be true because he "...held the money bag and used to steal the contributions" (Jn 12:6). Our desire for earthly possessions blinds us to the divinity of Jesus and spiritual realities. Such desires can also prevent us from knowing Jesus' presence and divinity in the Eucharist.

Jesus ordered the Apostles, "Go...to the lost sheep of the house of Israel". They would be sent to the nations of the world only after the resurrection and the gift of the Spirit.

Each of us is also called to go to our own families to share the riches of our faith and our friendship with Jesus. To us, as to the men who had been freed from legions of devils, Jesus says, "Go home to your family and announce to them all that the Lord in his pity has done for you" (Mk 5:19).

Jesus told his disciples, "As you go, make this proclamation: 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand'"

God's rule in the heart of each person was soon to be unleashed through the paschal mystery and the gift of the Spirit. His kingdom will come in us when his will begins to rule our will. Then God becomes ruler and king of our heart. His presence in us, and all the riches of his grace, becomes ours when we open our heart to receive him.

The kingdom of heaven of God was fully in Jesus, for God ruled his life completely. "The Father and I are one," Jesus said (Jn 10:30). This kingdom could be seen in its full beauty and power in the risen Jesus who gave us a preview of his resurrected state in the mystery of the Transfiguration (Mt 17:2).

Jesus continued his instructions to the Apostles saying, "Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, drive out demons." Much of the healing, raising of the spiritually dead, cleansing from the leprosy of sin, and driving out demons from people's lives takes place quietly and in the secrecy of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. In the days of Jesus, there was a need to demonstrate the power of Jesus and his gospel in astonishing miracles. But this same power is at work in a dramatic yet hidden manner in the confessional. Sin and Satan are overcome. Grace and peace are restored.

Our gospel today ends with, "Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give." The truths of salvation are so important for everyone that the disciples who have received the powers of ministry must teach these truths without regard for the listeners' ability to pay. But at the same time, Jesus hastens to say two verses later in this gospel, "The laborer deserves his keep" (Mt 10:10), or in the words of St. Paul to Timothy, "A worker deserves his pay" (1 Tim 5:18). In other words, those who preach the Gospel and minister its gifts have a right to be supported by those who are benefited by it.