

Discipleship “Part 2”:

In a recent homily, I mentioned what Jesus had to say about the role of His followers, which boils down to showing a commitment to put their new-found Christian Faith into practice.

This week we'll be celebrating the Conversion of St Paul - from a rather vicious character whose 'vocation' was to hunt down the early Christians down. Even so, he was to become, arguably, one of the most ardent and well-travelled of all the Apostles. Strictly speaking, in the early days especially, one could only be truly called an apostle if you had seen Jesus 'for real'. But Paul was seen as an exception, in that he could demonstrate profoundly special empathy and relationship with his 'living lord'.

I thought I'd briefly review the characteristics that Jesus was looking for when he started to recruit His team:

- *Simon (Peter)*: was a boisterous, but natural, leader; often outspoken, but extremely loyal, except for a bit of a wobble just before Christ's execution. Apart from that, he was a “true-blue” - the “rock”!
- *Andrew*: was Peter's brother, and an early disciple of John the Baptist. Andrew became an enthusiastic follower of Jesus, and introduced Peter to Him.
- The brothers *James and John*, were both known for being men of intense passion. Because of this Jesus nicknamed them Sons of Thunder. (*Mark 3:17*).
- *Philip*: What do we know about Philip? To quote Paul Daniels, “not a lot” - other than his passion for evangelism
- *Nathanael* (also known as *Bartholomew*) - was known to be sincere in his love for God, but a bit prone to prejudice (John 1:46 records him as saying: “*Can any good thing come from Nazareth?*”). But Jesus still said of him: “*Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!*”
- *Matthew*: Also known as Levi, the Son of Alphaeus, was a tax collector for the Roman occupiers, one of the most despised people in the whole of Israel
- *Thomas*: usually (and, arguably, unfairly) referred to as “Doubting Thomas” - also called Didymus (a twin). He was an outspoken skeptic, to the point of being a pessimist. But he was the first to declare wholeheartedly: “*My Lord and My God!*”
- *James the Less*: the son of Alphaeus. Except for a few details about his family, there is nothing more mentioned about him in Scripture. We'd describe him these days as a “valued team member”.
- *Simon the Zealot*: Simon was probably a political activist in his younger years - extremely loyal, passionate, courageous and an enthusiastic evangelist.
- *Judas*, son of James: Also known as Jude, Thaddeus, or Lebbaeus, he lived in obscurity as “simply, one of the team”.

- *Judas Iscariot*: Although a traitor, he did give three years of his life to Jesus, but certainly not his heart - eventually betraying Him for thirty pieces of silver. In truth, even that was 'required of him'

So, these twelve men, between them, could be loyal and courageous, but on occasion skeptical and fearful; they could be extremely enthusiastic, impulsive, and even fiery in the forefront; or quiet and reserved in the background. Their careers and life experiences encompassed (mainly) fishing, but included collecting unjust taxes, collaboration with the Roman occupation, political activism (Zealots) and even a turncoat. In short, they were a small group of individuals that represented a typical broad-spectrum of the community they lived in, and were immersed in the politics and problems of their day.

And then we hear about Saul of Tarsus - a man who relentlessly persecuted early Christians - but was well educated and pretty well placed in society, especially with the Romans and Jewish authorities - who despised Christians. And yet, he, too, came to the faith after his traumatic experience on the road to Damascus!

Thought for the Week: What did these people have in common that we might learn from?

Well probably the hardest part of being a proactive disciple was, and still is, that we have to trust that the Holy Spirit will guide our future, and enable us to do what is needed, when it's needed. And identify opportunities to do so as they arise... But what disciples are continually challenged-by is stepping into the unknown - which requires courage, faith and trust that we will have what it takes, or be given what-we-need, when-it's-needed.

As I've mentioned before, Jesus wants to take us as we are, as He 'took' Saul of Tarsus and 'the twelve'. He can then nurture a special relationship with everyone involved, which leads to an absolute commitment to Him, and absolute trust in His leadership when faced with an unknowable future.

To be effective disciples, we must be prepared to 'obey that same calling', not just with confidence that that things will change, but that we will be changed as we "win" others for God.

But for now, to be at our most effective, we don't necessarily have to aspire to great things; we have 'to be ourselves', and make sure that everything we do for others, and pray for, is done with great love

Are we up to it?