

Vespers Homily

The Second Sunday of Epiphany

January 18, 2015

Psalm 40:1-11

John 1:29-42

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Some years ago an Episcopal seminary that shall remain nameless, although some do say it is the very best Episcopal seminary, conducted an unofficial survey of the seminarians. It was rumored, but never proven, that the faculty also participated. If so, their results were never made public.

It was a simple survey: just three questions. The results were quite revealing. I know you are all thinking, “Gosh, Father Peter, can we take the survey, please?” And so, very well, here it is:

Question 1: Name the Seven Dwarves in Disney’s “Snow White.”
(A: Doc, Sleepy, Grumpy, Happy, Sneezy, Bashful and Dopey.)

Question 2: Name Santa’s eight reindeer:
(A: Donner, Blitzen, Comet, Cupid, Prancer, Dasher, Vixen, Dancer)

You see where this heading, don’t you?

Question 3: Name the Twelve Apostles.

That was, and is, of course, a trick question. The answer would be that it depends on which Gospel you’re reading. Some names are

consistent, at least in the three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). “Synoptic” in Greek means that they can be seen together. All three mention Simon, called Cephas or Peter; Andrew; James; John; Philip; Bartholomew; Thomas; Matthew; James, the Son of Alphaeus; and Judas Iscariot.

But then, depending on which gospel you read, there are Thaddaeus, who is also called Lebeaus, in Matthew and Mark, but not in Luke; Judas Son of James in Luke, but not in Mark or Matthew; Simon the Cananaean in Mark and Matthew; and Simon the Zealot, who might be the Cananaean. Then, if you add the Gospel of John, you have Nathanael of Cana.

The problem is that all the lists, all four gospels, are correct according to their sources and their purpose. All the gospels rely on the memory of those who were there, people who actually saw and heard and remember, or think they remember, the events of which the gospels tell.

Each gospel was written for specific groups. Mark, probably the earliest, was written to record the memories of a fast-disappearing generation of witnesses. It is journalism, fast-paced; it constantly says *kai euthus*, Greek for “and immediately.” Matthew was written for the Jewish community of Christians and speaks of Jewish history and traditions without definition. Luke was written for the Greek community of believers. He explains Jewish custom to a Gentile, pagan community.

Today we have the Gospel of John. Some say it was the earliest written; some say the last. In reality we have to see it as parallel to the Synoptics. It is thought to have been written for the Community of the Beloved Disciple, the disciple whom Jesus loved, the community centered on John. It's not a biography of Jesus; it assumes you know all that and are now ready to see those events as spiritual, so there are no fishing boats to be abandoned when Jesus calls in John's Gospel, rather a continuation of the events of

Jesus' baptism and anointing with the Holy Spirit. In John's Gospel the Baptizer is already converted and convinced of Jesus' divinity and proclaims it to his own disciples, two of whom follow Jesus. They are Andrew and another unnamed disciple, generally thought to be John, of course.

It's interesting that in John's Gospel, Jesus calls only those two, Andrew and probably John; it's Andrew that first brings Simon Peter to Jesus. Later, Jesus calls Philip who calls Bartholomew. Bartholomew is thought to be another name for Nathanael of Cana, which would explain Jesus' presence at a wedding feast, the site of His first miracle. The only other names mentioned are Thomas and James. John presents a different memory, a different telling, no less true than Matthew, Mark and Luke.

The real question posed by any list of Jesus' disciples is "Who were they?" What do we actually know about them?

We are told that Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John were fishermen on the Sea of Galilee. We are told that Matthew was a tax collector and then . . . ?

Perhaps that's the point. The vast majority of those who followed Jesus and the twelve are merely the inner circle of a far larger following, who are to us nameless. They are people touched by the word or the presence of Jesus in their lives and who committed themselves to His service; the names of some of them have come to us without explanation, the names of most are unknown and perhaps unimportant.

What is important is that they inspired others, who, in turn, inspired others, who inspired others, until you and I, sitting here tonight are their successors in faith. You and I were, in turn, inspired by some person, some moment, some sense of His presence in our lives. We seem to be now as we were then, except for that commitment and dedication that has transformed us and enriched us. That is what you

and I share with those first ones, known and unknown, who answered His call to follow Him.

There is a deceptively simple hymn written by a young English mother named Lesbia Scott. She married a military officer who later became a priest – it can happen. The songs she wrote to sing to her children were collected and published in 1929 in *Everyday Hymns for Little Children*. One of her hymns that speaks to us most eloquently has been a part of our hymnal since 1940; we sing it on All Saints' Day. An attempt to drop it from the 1979 Hymnal, because it lacked “profundity,” met with an overwhelmingly negative response. The tune in our hymnal, “Grand Isle,” was written specifically for it.

Unfortunately there has been a local tradition to alter verse two to read that “one was slain by a fierce wild priest”; we will not go into that this evening.

It's that third verse that says:

They lived not only in ages past,
There are hundreds of thousands still.
The world is bright with the joyous saints
Who love to do Jesus' will.
You can meet them in schools, or in lanes, or at sea,
In church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea;
For the saints of God are just folk like me,
And I mean to be one too.”

In His Holy Name.