

“Will you follow Him?” Mark 1:16-28

“Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him. And they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and was teaching. And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes. And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God.” But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him. And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, “What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” And at once his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ! Jesus in our today's reading is described as ... as a great and unstoppable force. Just listen how intensely Mark describes the actions of Jesus. Jesus saw Simon and Andrew and said: “Follow me!” And immediately they left their nets and followed Him. Then He saw James and John and immediately He called them and they followed Him.

Then immediately on the Sabbath He entered the synagogue and was teaching. All were astonished. And immediately He rebuked the unclean spirit and it came out. They were amazed: “What is this? A new teaching with authority!”

Yes! This is what we will reflect today. On Jesus authority. I need to warn you. This sermon spoke to me, when I was working on it, and it was challenging for me. It probably will be challenging for you too. That is a good thing. Be ready!

I want to reflect together with you on our problem. On which problem? On Jesus' authority. On His forceful invitation: “Follow me!” That is about the 1st Commandment. “Follow me! Fear, love, trust, obey me above everything else! Trust me, when I say that I know what is good for you! Let me be your God!”

Can you feel why this is a problem for us? Because ... we just don't want to let someone else to define how we are to live. For we ourselves want to be in control. We ourselves want to be like gods.

“I want to choose what will be good for me and what will not. Not someone else...”. We all are born with this incurable sickness. We can see it already in little children. As soon as they are physically strong enough to do anything, what do they want to do? To listen to their parents' wisdom? No, they want to do their own thing. They may have the best, the wisest, the most loving parents,

who wish them well, and truly understand what would be good for them, and still – the rebellious spirit in them will urge them to do their own thing.

That is a great illustration of what our relationships with the Triune God are like. He wants to be our God, we respond: “I want to have the last word, I want to decide how to live, and no one is going to tell me what to do with my life!”

Even as we have the most loving, the most caring, wisest, all-knowing and all-powerful Father of all. Still the same reaction. This is why, when Jesus calls us with His divine authority “Follow me!” – that is a real problem to all the nice and good and moral people who want to call themselves Christians.

Jesus says: “Entrust your life to me, and I will give you something far greater than your wildest dreams. I will give a new and exciting, joy-filled and meaningful life, a new mission, I will give you a new and hope-filled future.

Come, follow me and we will reign together in the New Heavens and New Earth, come!” And what do we say? “No thanks! Just help me to get what I want, help me with my problems, that’s enough, for I have my own plans.”

If this is how we relate to Jesus, if we foolishly dream that He has come so that He could help us to get what we want, to achieve our plans – then we have gotten it totally wrong. If this is how we relate to the Triune God, then the scornful accusation is true. Then our God is for us – just a crutch, when life is too hard, or a patch – when we want some comfort or healing.

Then we are not disciples of Jesus, not more than those crowds who followed Him and wanted to benefit from Him whichever way possible. For they didn’t want to listen to what Jesus was teaching, for they found it boring and heavy and offensive, nor they wanted to do His will.

We need to get this – being a Christian is not about how I can fit Jesus in my life, in my busy schedule, in my plans. Nor about how He could help me to do, or achieve, or be who I want. Wrong! That’s paganism. If that is what we believe, then we are just pagans trying to get some blessings from this God.

To be a Christian, a disciple of Jesus, is the very opposite – how can this holy God, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit fit me, miserable and selfish sinner, into His great story, into His plan. What can He make of me, how can He use me! “Here I am, Jesus, send me, I am yours!” That is Christianity for us.

Jesus said: “Follow me!” Do you remember what the disciples replied? They sort of indicated that they probably would be ready to give Jesus ... a few hours per week. Perhaps it could Sunday morning, assuming there are no other plans. But, of course, there are some conditions attached.

Simon Peter said: “Sure, Jesus, if you help me out... see my mother-in-law is quite unwell, and my fishing business is struggling.” Andrew said: “Fine, I will be your disciple but as long as you don’t ask me to be your missionary and to tell others about you.” James said: “Good, but I hope that in return you will help me promoting my career. My Mom would really appreciate it.”

John: “Sure, Jesus, I will do my bit. Then others may notice how good and religious I am.” Philip: “Okay, but as long as I can decide for myself what to do with my life and time.” Bartholomew: “I am in, but as long as this doesn’t embarrass me before other people, who are more enlightened.”

Thomas: “I will give it a go, but as long as I don’t need to suffer any rejection, or hostility, or conflict.” Matthew the tax collector: “Yes, fine, Jesus, but as long as it doesn’t clash with my already busy schedule, you know...”. James the son of Alphaeus: “Fine, Jesus, but as long as you don’t expect me to learn what you teach. I already know enough.”

Simon Zealot: “Let’s do this, but I do hope that there are no any personal sacrifices involved.” Thaddaeus: “Yes, sure, but as long as it doesn’t hinder my lunch plans.” Judas Iscariot said: “Gladly, Jesus, but as long as you don’t touch my wallet, that’s my money, I earned it.”

Does any of these sound familiar? They certainly do to me. The apostles probably had reservations and concerns about following this Jesus. They were ordinary and imperfect people, just as we are. But with Jesus’ help they didn’t let such objections hinder them.

Such excuses are silly and embarrassing. Imagine, if the apostles let such selfish concerns to hinder them, what do you think – what would have happened? Nothing... the Church wouldn’t exist.

We cannot build the Church from bricks of indifference and complacency or self-interest. We cannot do it from the comfort of our lovely homes. The Church of Jesus Christ was and is built on sacrifices, on living sacrifices.

Jesus set the example. As did the apostles. Remember, they all, except John, were murdered for proclaiming the Gospel. The true disciples of Jesus have always followed in His footsteps. There is no way around. No sacrifice – no Church. Do you know what will happen if we have such “I will follow you, if... or I will follow you as long as...” attitude?

Nothing ... nothing will happen. After a while there will be no Church in this place. That’s it. Jesus will dwell with those who are willing to follow Him. Jesus does not ask us to suffer on the Cross as He did.

But He asks us to sacrifice ourselves – our comfort, our affluence, our fleshly priorities, our time, our efforts, our energy – reaching out to the lost fellow humans in our lives. He calls us: “Come to me, listen to me!

I will equip you and I will send you. I will walk with you, and I will bless you. I promise.” Bless?! Jesus will bless me?! That sounds good! We may get excited. “How will you bless me, Jesus?”

We often think about blessings as things we like and enjoy. And they most certainly are blessings of our gracious Father – health and abundant daily bread, and so on. But when it comes to following Jesus – those blessings are different.

“I will bless you ... with rejection, and stress, and trials, and losses, and testings, perhaps even with persecution. And when your life is over, I will give you the crown of glory – to you, my faithful servant – and you will reign with me in my Kingdom forever. This is my solemn vow to you!” That’s how He blesses us.

If the Spirit of God indeed dwells in us, if we are not Christians in name only, and only on Sunday mornings, if we want to follow Jesus, but it is the weakness of our sinful flesh that hinders us, then we should be ready to say to Jesus:

“I am yours, tell me what you want me to do, and I will do my best to glorify you!” Are we ready to say that? Are we? To be honest, that is a frightening question. I ask it to myself often.

“Am I ready to commit: “Here I am, send me!” Am I? Or do I just choose to do what I prefer and then persuade myself that this is what Jesus wants me to do?” Jana always tries to encourage me... But it is a scary question.

Are you willing to give your life in Jesus hands? What if we don’t like what He asks from us? What can we do? Who can help us with our cowardice, with our fear? We need to remember that we are not the only ones who are scared.

There was someone else. He was terribly scared to entrust Him in God’s hands. His Father had asked Him to do something for His lost brothers and sisters. He really didn’t like what He was supposed to do. His name was Jesus.

But He didn’t say: “I don’t want to empty myself of my divine glory and become a feeble creature! I don’t want to live in this broken and messy world, full with sufferings and injustice!”

He didn’t say: “I don’t want to sacrifice myself for those people who are going to use my kindness and then reject me, argue with me and try to kill me!” Jesus didn’t say “no”. He didn’t put forward any conditions. “I will do it if...”.

Came the last evening... Jesus was scared to death. He was sweating blood.

“Father I am so afraid. I really don’t want to do this. But let Your will happen!” Hours later Jesus gave Himself up to be accused, beaten and ... crucified.

For His lost brothers and sisters. For us. For you. Now He looks at us and says: “This is what I did for you, this is how precious you are to me. Will you follow me now? Will you trust me with your life so that I can bless you?”

I pray that as we look at Jesus the Holy Spirit would fill us with joyful courage to respond: “Jesus, you are more precious to me than my lunch plans, you are more precious than my comfort, you are more precious than my time, or even my earthly possessions.

You are my joy, you are my peace, you are my life, you are my beauty, you are my greatest prize and you are my glory... help me in my weakness, and I will follow you wherever you send me!”

If we do this, Jesus will bless us. In this age, and in the age to come. That is most certainly true. Amen.