



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: **"Fishers of Fish."**
Comment: Insert Comment here
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Readings for this Sunday:

Old Testament Jeremiah 3:21-4:2
Epistle 1 Corinthians 7:17-23
Gospel Mark 1:14-20

"Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." I must admit that I prefer that older translation. ("Fish for people" sounds a bit like a corporate headhunter.) But however it is rendered in English, it deals with the calling of Peter and his brother Andrew into the band of the disciples. The story has always bothered me, though. Yes, I believe that Jesus demanded of these fishermen that they decide to follow him without reserve. And I believe that Jesus does the same with us in our own lives. But even so, I can't help but feel sorry for the other members of the seafood cooperative there at the lakeside, and particularly their father Zebedee whom, we are told, "they left in the boat with the hired servants." So much for good old Dad! We're not told what the poor Zebedee said to his sons as they left him there, but he being a fisherman, we might expect that the language he used was rather "colorful"!

There is something else that concerns me in this story. If we see the story of the call of Peter and Andrew as an historical episode from the life of Christ, then it's easy to hear about these people long ago and oh so far away abandoning their careers and hitting the road with this wandering rabbi. But if we are expected to see this story as applying to us today, then we are asking for a load of guilt. It is an almost impossible expectation if we should see this as the ideal to work for: dropping everything and taking up the new calling of full-time itinerant preacher. Some may do this, but that

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makes it even harder on the majority who don't. Are they second-class Christians because they work 9 to 5 jobs, or raise their families, or are engaged in the merchant marine or in the arts?

I believe that all of us are called to follow Christ. It starts with our first inklings that there is a God who wishes to engage us in a personal relationship, and it is confirmed when we are baptized into Christ's Body the Church and accept the calling to see God and ourselves in a new way. But I also believe that not everyone is called in the same way, nor do we live out the vocation of being a Christian in identical fashion.

One of the really terrible effects of having professional clergy in the Church is the number of people who, when they have their first feeling of a personal and powerful spiritual awakening in their lives, feel compelled to go to seminary. Their friends and neighbors in the church often encourage that, since so few can imagine themselves being so very "religious" in the "real world." Indeed, they would prefer that those who start to take their religion seriously leave the business of everyday life so they won't show up the rest! Nothing makes church people more uncomfortable than someone who actually takes all of this seriously!

No, it is perfectly possible to take Jesus seriously when he calls you to follow him, and yet to do so in the context of a job or a family or a secular vocation. But what about Peter and the other apostles? Well, let's look at them. After that first Easter day, when our Lord told his friends to go ahead of him into Galilee, Peter didn't open a seminary- he went fishing! He returned to the life he knew and which, we presume, he was good at. Jesus had made him a "fisher of men," perhaps, but he never forgot that he was also a "fisher of fish."

Paul, to name another apostle, was the most ambitious multi-tasker we know of in the New Testament: the founder of churches all over the ancient world and the author of many letters to keep in touch with his far-flung franchise. But we are told that rather than relying on "the kindness of strangers", Paul was happy to revert to his family business of tent making when he needed funds. "Tents R Us, Paul of

Tarsus, Local Agent.” In fact, some scholars suggest that many of Paul’s travels might have been primarily business trips, and that while he was in Ephesus or Corinth or Thessalonica for the firm, he also preached and established churches for his newfound Faith. He’s proud of the independence it gave him, and many clergy have been jealous of Paul when faced with the compromises that being an employee inevitably bring. Of course, that’s not true for *me*!

In one of the letters that Paul wrote to his friends in Corinth, a portion of which we heard read today, he says this: “Let every one lead the life which the Lord assigned to him, and in which God has called him.” He goes on to say that this has to do with being circumcised or being a slave. But it can mean more, and it did for Paul himself.

Certainly there were things that had to change when Paul received his call to follow Christ. He had to give up persecuting Christians, for example! But he apparently didn’t have to give up making tents, and that is significant. All the people that Jesus preached to didn’t leave their careers and their families, only those who were specifically called to the role of apostle. And despite the fact that Paul believed that the world would be coming to a certain end very soon, he didn’t tell people to stop working...even if he *did* tell them not to bother about getting married!

The early church did in fact have some careers that it held to be incompatible with the Christian life: prostitution comes to mind, and the army, too, at least in the early years. Embarrassingly for those of us who love the theatre, actors entering the Church had to give up show business at least until the late medieval period. But otherwise, the whole, wide world of business, commerce and most of the arts was baptised into the Body of Christ, in which each member, like a part of body (again quoting tentmaker Paul), had a rôle to play.

The call to follow Christ doesn’t necessarily mean that you have to become an apostle or a priest or a lay preacher. It *might*, but it just as easily might *not*. It is every bit as important when you hear your own personal call to follow Christ as a mother, an engineer, and insurance salesperson, an overseas foreign worker, a banker, a diplomat, a student or a musician. And it is absolutely true that those who

successfully perform the rôle of faithful, believing, and witnessing Christian *and at the same time* are productive members of the secular world have something to tell the clergy about what Jesus the Carpenter really was doing when He incarnated God on earth in His tradesman's person. The plan of salvation is for the whole world, not just the ones in collars. Indeed, the call for the vast majority will not involve being "professionally religious" but rather being "religiously professional" in whatever calling God has blessing you with: "the life which the Lord assigned" you.

When Peter and Andrew left their poor father in the boat, someone had to stay and do the work. And I'm sure that they were blessed, too!