

Third Sunday of Ordinary Time

I've had time to do a bit more reading than usual since Christmas. Among what I read was "The Long Loneliness", the autobiography of Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker Movement. She tells the story of how she was somehow attracted to the Catholic Church over a long period of time. But it was only after the birth of her daughter who she had baptised as a Catholic, that she herself answered the call to be Catholic. And for her it was a very radical choice. It meant leaving behind her Bohemian lifestyle and separating from her common law husband and the father of her child. Not everybody takes up the call to follow Jesus in such a sudden and radical way. But it is a call that we all need to hear and answer.

We heard first today how the prophet Jonah responded to God's call to go to Nineveh to preach to the people there. But you might have noticed that we read from chapter three. The first two chapters tell the story of how Jonah resisted the call to be God's prophet. He ran away from God. It was only after he was thrown overboard in a raging storm and swallowed by a big fish that he was ready to say yes to God's call to preach to the people of Nineveh. But the people to whom he preached had no hesitation about changing their way of living.

Our gospel tells of the call of the first disciples of Jesus. We are listening to Mark now and he tells the story a

little differently to what we heard last week from John. We are told that after John the Baptist had been arrested Jesus went into Galilee. The Greek literally says that John was "handed over". It is an expression that we are going to hear again when Jesus is handed over to the Roman authorities before his suffering and death. Jesus begins his mission by repeating the same words that John had used. "The kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent and believe the Good News."

Right from the beginning Jesus calls others to share in his ministry. He was walking along the shore of the sea of Galilee when he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net in the lake. Jesus calls them to follow him. "Follow me and I will make you fishers of people." Without hesitation they leave their nets and begin to follow Jesus.

A little further along the lake Jesus sees two other brothers, James and John. They were not fishing from the shore. They were part of a family business and had their own boat and they employed others. They were in the boat with their father Zebedee when Jesus called them. Our translation tells us that they were mending their nets as if they had just finished fishing. A more accurate translation is that they were preparing their nets. They were just about to go out onto the lake. It makes their unconditional decision to follow Jesus even more

dramatic. They left behind their father, their boat and the people they employed.

I think most of us would find it hard to identify with the way that these first disciples so quickly and so radically took up the invitation to follow Jesus. This part of the gospel describes the essence of what it means to begin to follow Jesus. But as we continue to read Mark's gospel we will discover that Jesus needed to gradually teach those first disciples what it meant to be a disciple. Each time they understood more, they had to make a new commitment to follow Jesus.

When our Pastoral Council was trying to give words to our Parish Vision we chose to say that we are a community learning to be disciples of Jesus. We had a strong sense that we had begun to take up the call to be disciples of Jesus, but that we had a long way to go. Our mission was to find ways to help everyone in the Parish to more fully say yes to the invitation to follow Jesus. We know that we cannot do this alone. We need each other to help us to grow. We are called to be a community of faith. It makes a difference if we are here or not. It makes a difference if we take the time to speak to one another or not. The Sunday obligation to come to Mass was never about our obligation to God. God doesn't need us to come to Mass. We come to Mass because we are the ones who need to come to Mass. We

come to Mass because others need us to be here for them. Every time we choose not to come, our community is poorer.

I spent two days this week at the Australian Open. I was there because I was invited to go. I was there with a handful of people that I knew including my sister Liz who was there because I invited her. But I was part of a crowd of fifty thousand people who were watching the tennis together. We could have all stayed home and watched it on television. But how much poorer would the tournament have been if we had chosen to do that. Can you imagine the tennis being played in an empty stadium? No encouragement; no applause; no expressions of joy or thanks or disappointment.

For a few hours I had the joy of being part of a group of people that was almost a community. And we were there only to watch a few games of tennis. How much more joy do we have when we gather as disciples of Jesus, not to watch, but to be involved deeply in the celebration of the Eucharist. We bring to prayer all that has happened during the week. We listen to God's living word proclaimed for us. We are drawn into his life-giving death and resurrection. We are nourished by his body and blood. We are sent out to witness to the relationship that Jesus has with us. And we can do all this because Jesus has called us to follow him.