

The Text of a Sermon Preached at St. Mary Anne's Episcopal Church
by Paul DeWitt Reid, Seminarian
Third Sunday after the Epiphany, January 27, 2008

Isaiah 9: 1-4; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23

We can scarcely comprehend the idea of immediately leaving our father to follow Jesus. Would Jesus really want us to do that? Surely he would want us to stay with our family to help and care for them! That is not what happens in this story. "As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him." These words are meant to shock us, and they were even more shocking to those in the time of the early church, a time when one's first loyalty was always supposed to be to one's family and one's clan.

There was someone else in those days that did everything he could to get people to lose their first loyalty to the family and clan, and to give first loyalty to him instead – this was the Roman emperor. His empire had found a new way to hold the peoples it had conquered. Instead of simply killing off, enslaving, and dispersing the inhabitants of a country, as had been done for thousands of years before, the Romans said and meant, "Join us, follow us – you too may be part of the greatest power structure under heaven." And so, countless numbers were swept up in this net, leaving their fathers, their own culture and people to become one with the empire, an empire that would guarantee peace on earth instead of these countless and petty squabbles between one tiny principality and another that had killed and maimed so many in pointless wars. Leave your father and become part of the rulers of people; follow the emperor who builds an empire of peace from the power of Rome for the good of all humankind.

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people." Jesus also called people to leave their fathers. In this he meant them to leave the pettiness of sept and clan, to lift their eyes and behold the fair beauty of the LORD. In the very next chapter of Matthew, we find

how the Kingdom that Jesus calls them – and us - to is very different from that of the empire, as he preaches to us the great Sermon on the Mount.

For hundreds of years after the resurrection, people left their fathers to follow Jesus. As they did this, they denied the emperor and the empire and they suffered great persecution for it. In time, the empire tried to absorb Christianity by making it a state religion. For the first time, people became Christian because it was the convenient thing to do or just because everyone was doing it. But there have always been many who have still had to choose between the call of empire and the call of Jesus Christ from St. Anthony to St. Francis to Thomas More and Thomas Cranmer to Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Eventually, all of us leave our fathers, we leave the security and the standards of our forbearers and we follow – whom? Who do we follow? We shouldn't be naïve enough to think that we can wholly blaze our own trail – we will inevitably follow someone or something. Will we follow the empire or will we follow Jesus?

The empire is subtly different now – but it is still the empire. Sometimes it is blatantly associated with a country, as it was for Nazi Germany. Other times it is associated with a way of life, such as the insidious call to us to consume more and more, to acquire more and more stuff, to seek status by spending our treasure on the exclusive cars we drive or the clothes and accessories that we wear, or the stylish places we go to on our vacations. The empire calls to us from the Sex in the City and Desperate Housewives society, telling us to pursue a life of pleasure; that it is OK to treat others as objects to use and then discard. All too often the empire calls to us from the corridors of power, telling us to live in fear of hidden enemies, to reject the stranger, to cast out the immigrant.

It is a difficult time for us – not quite like the times of my father, when there was definitely a world to save from tyrants who wished to rule the earth. Now things are more difficult; as Christians we must strive harder to be in the world but not of it. Sometimes our society or our government is on the right path, but often they stray off it and follow the call of empire instead. Now as in Jesus' time, we must be ready to hear the call of

Jesus to leave our nets and even our fathers to follow only him, and ignore the voice of empire.

What we do here at St. Mary Anne's is so vital, so important; united in the same mind and the same purpose - here where we proclaim the gospel, and with plain speech not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. Our own children and all of us as children of God learn here to hear the call of Christ, to know that the Kingdom of God has come near, and to recognize the temptations of empire and to repent when we fall under its sway.

Brothers and sisters the sad truth is that we no longer live in a Christian world. Let us be ready always to drop our nets and follow the call of Christ.

Amen.