

Discipleship and the Divine Likeness

By Matthew Genung

June 28, 2020 – Thirteenth Sunday Ordinary Time

Readings: 2 Kgs 4.18-11, 14-16a; Rom 6.3-4; Matt 10.37-42

Discipleship is God's Plan for Man from the Beginning

God is continually calling us to discipleship. What does it mean to be a disciple? How is one to respond to this divine invitation? What anthropology, what theology, and what moral choices are at stake? Is this call reserved to the Church's ordained ministers, or to a select few? The readings for this Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time provide clear witness to the revelation of God's plan for all men. The first reading gives us an example for Christian discipleship from the Old Testament. The second reading and the Gospel explain the modality of becoming a disciple, indicate the depths of the mystery into which we are called, and identify the object of our hope.

Disinterested Love

The first reading is an excerpt from one of the narratives regarding a miracle worked by Elisha (Hebrew for "God is salvation"), a great prophet of ancient Israel and the successor to Elijah. He was a miracle worker and a prophet to kings, the poor and lowly of Israel, and the land of Judah in the ninth century B.C. Through Elisha's intercession, God saved Israel from the Moabites and Arameans, and he also worked great miracles in the life of various obscure individuals. In today's reading we hear the first episode in a longer narrative regarding how God, through Elisha's intercession, miraculously saved an unnamed Shunamite woman.

In the previous narrative (2 Kgs 4.1-7), a poor widow and her numerous children were at the point of debt enslavement, when Elisha took the initiative and God saved them by providing a superabundance of oil. In this narrative, by contrast, a childless woman with abundant resources takes the initiative to help Elisha, and she is saved by the birth and subsequent restoration of a son. The woman's character is foregrounded, and she can be seen as an exemplary model of Christian discipleship.

The narrative emphasizes the disposition of the woman. She recognizes Elisha as a man of God, something other characters fail to do, often to their downfall. She takes the initiative with Elisha, insisting upon feeding and sheltering the itinerant man of God; Elisha asks for nothing. Because he is a man of God, she is devoted to his welfare, and she is disinterested in benefiting from her service to the prophet. The narrator describes this woman of Shunam as a "woman of influence." Literally, the woman was "great", meaning that she was a woman of status. This is manifested by her response to Elisha in v. 13, when she declines the prophet's offer to intercede in her behalf with the political authorities.

It is her humble disposition toward God's servant that results in the promise of a son. Through the intercession of Elisha, as a reward for her good will toward the man of God, the woman conceives and bears a son. This son is to be a gift of life for both her and her husband, since her husband is old and, upon his death, she will become a childless widow. The son is not requested by the woman, but her poverty is seen by the man of God, and the Lord gives her a son. This son

will eventually fall ill and die, and the woman will once again take the initiative, this time insisting that Elisha himself come to save her son. Elisha obliges, restores life to the son, and gives the son back to his mother alive.

The Shunamite woman recognizes the identity of Elisha as a man of God and is accordingly devoted to his service. Even though she is a sterile woman with an elderly husband, she is disinterested in her own welfare, but rather is concerned with the affairs of God. She is rewarded with the promise of the gift of life, that of her son, which ironically carries with it the experience of great suffering. This woman is bold in soliciting what is truly of value from the one who can really bring about what is promised — not from the king or his court, but from the prophet and his God.

Be Like the Lord

Today's Gospel reading is the conclusion of Jesus' great discourse on mission and discipleship, the second of the five great discourses of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel. The discourse is centered upon the relationship of *likeness* between the disciple and Jesus, summarized in Matt 10.24-25: "No disciple is above his teacher, no slave above his master." It is enough for the disciple that he become like his teacher, for the slave that he become like his master. This passage tells us that to be a disciple is to be like Jesus.

How is the disciple to be like Jesus? The disciple must do what Jesus does, and the disciple must suffer what Jesus suffers. In Matt 10, the disciple's activities correspond to those of Jesus throughout the Gospel, as is seen in the following examples: the disciple heals every disease and infirmity (10.1 — an imitation of Jesus in 4.23); proclaims that the kingdom of heaven is at hand (10.7 — an imitation of Jesus in 4.17); casts out demons (10.8 — an imitation of Jesus in 9.32-33); heals lepers (10.8 — an imitation of Jesus in 11.5); raises the dead (10.8 — an imitation of Jesus in 11.5); will be handed over to the Sanhedrin (10.17 — an imitation of Jesus in 26.57-68); will be taken before governors (10.18 — an imitation of Jesus in 27.1-2, 11-26); will be called Beelzebul (10.25 — an imitation of Jesus in 9.34; 10.25); the disciple will be betrayed by his own kin, will be persecuted, and this will continue until the Parousia (v. 23 — an imitation of Jesus in 13.54-58). The disciple should not be afraid in the face of this mission because of the promised salvation offered by the Father.

It is within this wider context that we should hear today's reading. Although from its beginning the discourse is addressed to the twelve apostles, the teaching on discipleship should not be considered as exclusively bearing on the apostles and their successors. The object of Jesus' teaching is generalized from v. 24, where the saying is applied to all disciples. This is explicit again in v. 32f, where the saying of Jesus applies to "everyone"; and again in vv. 37ff, where "whoever" is the subject of the verbs.

In today's Gospel, the vocabulary of worth is found three times in vv. 37-39: "whoever does x is not worthy of me." The Greek term "worth" derives from the image of the traditional balance scale: when the weight is equal on both sides of the fulcrum, the worth of the objects on the scale is equal. The measure of worthiness in this saying is the value one places on various objects of love. There are three clauses that express three different objects of love: mother and father, son and daughter, and oneself. The subordination of these three sets of objects to love for Jesus seems to increase progressively in difficulty. If we consider these verses in light of the notion of discipleship as being *like* the Lord, we may paraphrase the saying as the following: if one loves mother, father, son, daughter, or self, more than God, one is not like the Lord; one is not a disciple. How is one to love? For the disciple, the love of father, mother, son and daughter must be subordinate to the love of the Lord. The exhortation to take up one's cross and follow after Jesus is an exhortation to love the Lord more than one loves any values attached to one's own life. One must be willing to lose one's life, in greater and smaller ways, for the sake of the Lord, if one is to be like Jesus.

The final part of this discourse deals with the reward not only for the disciple, but also for the one who receives the disciple. The terminology of welcoming or receiving recurs eight times in vv. 40-42, indicating once again the relationship of the likeness between the disciple and Jesus. The one who receives the disciple receives Jesus too, and also receives the Father who sent him. It is under these conditions of discipleship that one is righteous, that one is a prophet, and that one communicates Jesus himself to those whom he encounters, including one's own kin.

The brief verses from Paul's letter to the Romans shed further light on this theme of discipleship. Although the language of discipleship is not used here, the same reality is expressed, so that baptism and discipleship can be understood as inextricably linked (see Matt 28.19). The sacrament of baptism incorporates man into the mystery of Christ and his Church. The baptized are incorporated into Christ's death and his burial, and the hoped-for promise is

incorporation into his resurrected life. They are dead to self and live for God in Jesus. When Paul writes of walking in this newness of life, he means that one's moral conduct in all circumstances and relationships must be in accordance with the life he hopes to receive. Paul exhorts the baptized to a particular disposition when he writes: "you must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God." They must have an understanding of the reality of their own lives. The notion is the same as in the Gospel reading: those who lose their life for the sake of the Lord will find life. Paul insists that the baptized are changed in accordance with the paschal mystery, and as such must conform their minds and their wills to the new reality in which they stand by grace.

Becoming a disciple of Jesus means to be baptized into the mystery of his passion, death, and resurrection, and in this to become like him. In the light of the identity of Jesus as true God and true man, we may say that to be a disciple is to become like God; in light of the first creation account, where it is revealed that God wills that man be made in the "likeness of God" (Gen 1:26), this call is universal. It is the vocation of every man to be a disciple, which is to love with the love of God. This is to be authentically human and to find one's life.

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For Further Reading

- Bianca Czaderna, [*“What do you Love?”*](#)
- St. John Paul II, [*Novo millennio*](#)
- [*“The Face of Christ in the Face of the Church”*](#)

In Short . . .

- *Christian discipleship is a call to be like the Lord.*
- *Elisha’s dedication to his mission as the Lord’s prophet demonstrates the attitude of the disciple. The Shunamite women’s disinterested love toward Elisha reveals a universal call to discipleship.*
- *The Christian disciple must do what Jesus did and suffer what Jesus suffered.*
- *A disciple’s love is always ordered, first and foremost, toward the Lord.*
- *The Christian call to discipleship is for every baptized Christian; it is not limited to a select few.*