

September 2, 2004
Aquinas Institute, Midday Prayer
Reading: Luke 5:1-11

It seems like such a happy gospel:
a call along the shores of a lake
the promise of an incredible future.

Just the sort of passage that should be a joy to preach on at the beginning of a new school year – in the midst of a community that has heard *just such a call* to follow Jesus in the study of theology and the practice of ministry.

After some of the readings that the lectionary has handed me of late, I felt that I myself had landed a great catch.... Until I began to explore some of the commentaries on the call of Christ by theologians such as Dietrich Bonhoffer, who writes:

“When Christ calls someone, he bids that person, ‘Come and die.’”

Or our own beloved Thomas Aquinas who states that the most fitting beatitude for disciples of the study of theology is:

“Blessed are they who mourn.”

And it made me to ponder deeper the last words of the reading describing how the disciples parked their boats – the very same boats in which they had just experienced God’s presence and abundance – and “left everything.”

What is the cross of those called to theological study?

What is it that we mourn?

What is it that we park and leave?

Every vocation has a paschal journey that it must travel through which that call comes to its fullness.

What is ours?

We’ve been in school less than two weeks now and already a certain snicker passes through the crowd as we consider the mounds of reading piled up in the hallway just outside that door. When I took a class with Gerry Austin a couple years back, he would repeatedly remind us – and I quote – “You know that you are a graduate student when – should the recommended readings alone tumble over on you as you slept - you would be crushed, CRUSHED by the weight.”

Yes, there is a certain mourning here and I don’t want to diminish the reality of it, but I want to speak of a more subtle and silent – even hidden travail – that sometimes characterizes the journey of those who study theology. Closer perhaps to the heart of what Thomas alludes to. And, I just want to name it aloud, because should you enter into it in the weeks to come I want you to know it, not for what it seems to be, but for what it is – a paschal journey.

It happens to everyone a little bit differently.

Sometimes it happens in studying the Bible and you begin questioning whether – if this event from Genesis didn't actually happen in history - did anything?

Sometimes it happens in Christology when the historical Jesus you meet looks mighty different than the one who has given you such comfort all these years.

Sometimes it happens in Church history when the papal institution we uphold we discover was also capable of something called the Cadaver Council.

Or when the depth of the problem of theodicy really hits you for the first time.

Or when the picture of heaven you grew up with dissolves like cotton candy on a rainy day.

But, regardless of the trigger, it is a horrible moment when it feels as if everything is unraveling. One snipped thread affecting the entire web. The collapse of one conceptual domino sending all those behind it tumbling.

This is the silent travail of the theology student that Thomas speaks of: the experience of feeling like one is losing one's faith.

We came here prepared to make sacrifices for our call:

To hand over a fair chunk of change

To live on a diet of Ramen noodles and peanut butter sandwiches

To endure the confusion and perhaps ribbing of some of our friends and family members

And, in some cases, willing even to handover our lives to God in whatever way might be demanded of us

Never in our worst nightmares did we expect that we might have to let go of our conceptions of the God who drew us here in the first place; abandoning the boats, the vehicles in which we first heard our calls.

Blessed are they who mourn.

“The intellectual discipline of our study has this ultimate purpose,” writes Timothy Radcliffe, former master of the Order of Preachers, “to bring us to this moment of conversion when our false images of God are destroyed so that we may draw near to the mystery.” (Radcliffe, *Sing a New Song*, 64)

There will be times that we will be tempted to recoil from that mystery because it is so much larger, deeper, and murkier than we were able to see from the boat. And we will want to return to our previous life in which our world made sense and we knew who God was. And some of us might and that is okay because it means that God has a different paschal journey for us, a different way to draw us near.

But, if you find somewhere within yourself the strength to remain in the murky,
opaque waters of unknowing
and yet still get to your knees each morning,
and yet still sit humbly before this deconstructed but holy word,
and yet still gather around this scandalized but sacred table
and hope – this is key: and HOPE

Then know that God has placed within you the heart of a theologian
And that you are not losing your faith at all.
You are finding it.
This is the paschal journey of your very particular vocation
And “Do not be afraid,” Jesus whispers to those willing to follow.
“Do not be afraid.”