

Second Sunday

January 18, 2020

There seems to be a common theme in our readings today. It is that of being chosen. In our first reading from Isaiah the prophet reflects on his own call by God. It began, he tells us, when he was in his mother's womb. Then in the second reading from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul identifies himself as one who has been called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God. Finally, in today's Gospel John the Baptist points to Jesus as the one on whom the Spirit of God descended at his baptism. That, John tells us, was the sign given to him by God that this man was the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit because he is the son of God.

So the theme of being called by God, and often indeed from the womb. This theme is essential both to Jewish and Christian faith. For Jewish faith is based on the premise that the existence of the Jewish people as an identifiable unit in human history is due to God's call to Abraham and his sons and grandsons. And Christian faith simply follows suit. Christian faith, like Jewish faith before it, is built on the conviction that Jesus was called by God, and then Jesus called others, Paul among them.

This means that for the last 4000 years the western world has existed as a culture which presumed that God had begun a conversation with people and was still continuing it. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Jesus and of Paul had called and was still calling people to Himself. This belief had a wonderful implication. It meant that each individual was called by God from the womb and was therefore special in God's eyes. Was there an unwarranted reach involved in this implication? God called Abraham and his family. But did that call go beyond this Jewish family. Sometimes some Jews believed that it did not go beyond them. But with the coming of Jesus and his community things changed dramatically. Membership among the called was now extended to all. We heard about that expansion in last Sunday's second reading taken from the Acts of the Apostles. There Peter relates to us how he experienced the Holy Spirit coming down on the household members of a Cornelius, a non-Jew, and drew this conclusion from this experience: "In truth, I see that God shows no partiality. Rather, in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34-35). And Paul expresses this same belief in that wonderful sentence which he wrote to the Galatians (3:28): "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female;

for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendant, heirs according to the promise.”

It is time for us to let this presumption of our Jewish-Christian faith take hold of us more firmly. We are called. Therefore we have infinite value. The God of the universe knows us individually. And that belief should change the way we look at ourselves and at other people.

Sometimes it takes a physical gesture to bring home to us a reality. There was a picture in the paper last week of individuals carrying the documents of impeachment from the House of Representatives to the Senate chambers. A simple procession. Then in the senate each senator, addressed simply as Mr or Ms (I think it was Ms), but not as senator, was called forth to sign a paper which recorded his or her presence. Simple gestures, but they brought home the importance of this moment in the history of our nation. A president has been impeached, the third time in our country's history, and now it is the duty of these men and women, these senators, to evaluate the charges and either acquit or convict the president of them. It reminds me of the dramatic gesture at the beginning of the ordination service in our church. All of a sudden those to be

ordained disappear. They were just there in the middle aisle. Now they are gone. Then the congregation realizes that they are lying flat down on the ground while the congregation prays over them a long litany of the saints. Believe me, those on the ground will never forget that moment, that gesture.

We hear today so often of people who have lost hope, who have no idea of who they are and where they should be going. There is no script, there is no journey. We can help. We can tell them the Good News, that they are called, that they are loved, and there is a direction for them to go in. But, to do that convincingly, we have to return to our own roots, to that presumption of Jewish faith, that God calls us, and the presumption of Christian faith, that God calls us in Jesus his son, our brother, who, like us, tapped his way along the wall of life in faith, faith in his Father's call of him and us to life, both here and hereafter.