

The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

Fr. Mike Byron, Pastor: Sunday Homily

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This past week I spoke with both the 5th and the 8th grade classrooms of our parish school on the topic of priesthood. And in both cases I was asked the question I've been asked 100 times before: When and how did you know that you wanted to be a priest? It's a good question, requiring a fairly complicated answer in my case, but in reflecting on it I've been bothered by one word, i.e., "want." To want something satisfying as a career is certainly understandable, and presumably that's what attracts people to most of the decisions they make about work or lifestyle. There's nothing bad about that. But for a Christian, there's something incomplete about that. Because once we willingly enter into a relationship with Jesus Christ and the Church through Baptism, we are required to be attentive not only to what *I* want, but also to what *He* is asking me to do. Hopefully, those are the same thing, but certainly not always.

Each of today's Sacred Scriptures highlight that fact. All of the characters seem so confident, and bold, and satisfied to be carrying out their mission to make the reign of God known and present in the world. So we'd better remember a few historical details.

Today we hear from the Prophet Isaiah in the First Reading. He reports the Lord saying to him in Chapter 49, "You are my servant but that is too little for you. You are more than that; you are a light to every nation on Earth." Isaiah is confident to say so, even grateful. But how about if we go back to Chapter 6, when God's call first came to this man during a vision. Remember his first response? It was this: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips." Isaiah never *wanted* to be a prophet. He was terrified by the idea—as most any genuine prophet ought to be. If the only question for him had been, "What do I *want*," he surely would have said a resounding "No" to the call.

But that wasn't the only question. Sometimes what I want isn't a sufficient reason for a Christian.

Or let's consider St. Paul, from our Second Reading today (1 Cor.). It's the very opening of the letter and Paul seems almost proud of his role, and certainly confident about it:

"Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God..."

There's nothing there about which Paul wanted to be doing with his life, and for a very good reason. Remember his story, back in the book of Acts, when Paul was so pleased with himself for being the greatest *opponent* of Jesus and the New Church—until he got knocked to the ground and blinded by God? Paul never *wanted* to be an apostle. He wanted to *kill* the apostles. If the only questions for him had been, "What do I want," he, too, would have said a resounding "No" to the call.

But that wasn't the only question. Sometimes what I want isn't sufficient reason for a Christian.

And then we come to John the Baptist in today's gospel of John. Here's the man who was sent out into the rugged desert wilderness by God in order to baptize and wait for the arrival of the Lamb of God, this Jesus, whom John twice says he didn't even know. Who would *want* to do that? Once again, what John the Baptist *wants* is not the only issue here. It's a matter of being called and sent by one whose authority is greater than our desire.

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And finally, let us consider that Lamb of God himself, Jesus of Nazareth, whose faithfulness to the Father's call led him to rejection, insult, brutal suffering and death. It's safe to say that Jesus would have preferred it otherwise, and he certainly could have arranged for that, by working quietly in the carpenter's shop in Galilee and keeping his mouth shut, and avoiding what God had put him here to do and be. But for him, too, what one *wants* is only part of the story for any faithful disciple.

The minute that any of us willingly approach that baptismal font of life and Holy Spirit, we hand over the right to announce that "what I want" is the sole criteria for how to live my life. It's true for priests like me and it's true for every single one of us.

This past week I also had the privilege of visiting a few of our sick and dying parishioners in their homes. In one of them a husband told me about his wife's comment about her guilt and sorrow that she had become such a burden to him. She told him, "This isn't what you signed up for when you married me." His incredible response was, "Yes, it is; this is *exactly* what we signed up for." Wow. What a true disciple. Neither of them *wanted* this, but they were called by one who is greater than their preferences, called to be a witness to anyone who will notice.

The summons to be guided by a force, a voice, a person, a God who is far greater than—and sometimes quite other than—our personal preferences and wants is a summons that often flies in the face of the way the rest of the world operates today. The gospel message, that doing the will of God is more essential than doing what I'd like, is a message that has become difficult to hear sometimes. And all the more important. We Christian disciples are those who have chosen to let the Holy Spirit into the deliberations about how we are to act, what we are to value, and where we spend our energies throughout our lives—including the choice of our careers or vocations.

It's true that I came to discover that I wanted to be a priest—and that was an important insight—but it wasn't yet enough, until I and the whole church became convinced that God wanted that, too. This needs to be the pattern for all of us.

So, as we pray our Eucharist today, let us do so with hearts open truly to the wishes and wisdom of the Lord who calls us, whether those wishes seem easy or challenging to accept. And may we pray for a less automatic "I want" response to God's summons to discipleship.