

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A
January 23, 2011
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Tech Catholic Community, MIT Kresge Chapel, Cambridge, MA

Isaiah 8:23--9:3 Psalms 27 1 Corinthians 1:10-13, 17 Matthew 4:12-23

“Give my stumblings direction, give my vision wider view; an offering of ashes an offering to you.”

The first part of what I just sung, “give my stumblings direction, give my vision wider view,” believe it or not, were the words I used to begin my MIT application essay many years ago. As I was prayerfully reflecting upon today’s readings and what to say in this homily for my Mass of Thanksgiving here with the Tech Catholic Community in the MIT chapel, the song came back to mind, as it seemed like a fitting point of departure, with the added second half. Even more fitting for this Mass is the gospel that the Church has chosen for Sunday Masses this weekend. In today’s gospel reading we hear the evangelist Matthew’s account of the calling of Jesus’ first Apostles. My response to a call that was not entirely different from the one described in the gospel is what brings me back to MIT to celebrate with you today. And a closer reading of the gospel brings to the fore at least three features, three insights of what a call from God does or should entail.

The first insight in today’s gospel is that when we respond and fulfill the vocation for which God created us, it truly is a calling. Even if, as my opening song suggests, sometimes there might be some wanderings that God can someday use, a vocation is not an act of merely running away from what you don’t like, of escaping from the world. In a true calling, in a vocation, an invitation from God is involved. In Matthew’s account that we just heard, there is no evidence that Simon, Andrew, James and John were bad fishermen. Or that they were unhappy fishermen. Or that they were looking for a career change or for a bigger adventure or more money. They seemed like pretty content people, doing what they were doing. Yet they were called by God to give that up; to give up the way of life that they knew. God asked them to lay down their nets, so that they could pick up His nets. The encounter brings to mind images of Elijah meeting Elisha when the latter was at the plow; and how Elisha burned his plow and made a sacrifice of his ox when he accepted the call to be God’s prophet. In following a calling, there is an offering of ashes, a sacrifice to God involved, a giving up of our will to follow God’s will. Which is why I added a few more words from the song at the start than I had included years ago in my application essay, at a time when I was not quite ready to make an offering of ashes.

As I think back on my own path toward the priesthood, especially early in the process down this path, I was asked a number of times, “why do you want to become a priest?” At first I would often dance around the answer, but I eventually started to become quite blunt, “it is not that I want to become a priest, rather, I am responding to what I believe is God’s call; is what I believe God wants for me.” After all, I had a good job very related to my MIT thesis, and I was not overly thrilled about some of the sacrifices involved in the priesthood. In fact, to be honest with you, it was not until well into seminary when I could say that yes, I definitely want to be a priest. But I started to move forward in this direction because it had become clear to me that being a priest was the reason for which God made me. Back in May 2004 I visited an MIT classmate and his wife in Seattle. While there, I gave them one of my blunt answers. At the

time I was very much not to the point of 100% desiring to be a priest. Two and a half years later I saw the couple again at a wedding of one of our classmates. In the intervening time, she believed that she had started to become called by God to take on a role of church service herself. She told me, “when you were at our house two years ago, I could not understand at all what you were talking about. It made no sense. Why would you make a big career change if you didn’t want to do it? But now I get it.” And yes, there have been ashes, I had to give up a very comfortable lifestyle. I had to give up a career in which I was respected, that was at the cutting edge of the industry, in which I had interesting things to think about, and in which I was working with people I generally enjoyed and I got to travel frequently. Those are real ashes... giving that up that life was a sacrificial offering to make. And honestly, it is an ongoing offering.

A second aspect of a call is that in fulfilling the call, even if it is quite different than what He is calling us to do, even if we do have to lay down much of what we had done before, God will often build upon what we have done before. We see that in the specific words with which Jesus called the fishermen to become disciples: “I will make you fisher’s of men.” He used words that highlighted the continuity. While we will often have to give up much of what we had done before when we follow God’s will, there will likely be some continuity from the past to the future. This continuity should even be expected, trusting that God has been preparing each one of us for whatever vocation He created us from the time He knit us together in our mother’s womb and that there are no mere coincidences in God’s providence. While I can see ways in which this has been manifest in my own calling, an even clearer example of this kind of continuity can be found in the vocational story of a friend of mine. At this time 4 years ago, Stephanie was in her second year of a chemistry post-doc position at the University of Illinois. Starting on about her birthday of 2007, God called her to become a nun. I was one of the first people to whom she turned when she began to sense God’s voice, and I was blessed to hear frequently from her on how her vocation beautifully unfolded. As she grew in trust of God and of His love for her, and like the apostles, who quite quickly laid down their nets, Stephanie with relative speed laid down her lab coat and beakers, when God’s call became clear. The continuity in her vocation is that Stephanie ended up choosing Lucy as her religious name. Lucy means light, and she chose the name because she came to see how God was calling her to be an emitter of the light of His love in the world in a way very similar to the fluorophores which she had studied as a chemist. When she reached the point of taking a new name a few months ago, she beautifully explained in a letter to her friends how the chemistry she once studied now describes her role as a nun in bringing God’s love to others. And now, every time I hear God referred to as light, such as in the first and third readings and the responsorial psalm, I fondly and prayerfully think of Sr. Lucy.

The third insight of a vocational calling that we hear today is that while God calls, the ball is placed in our court to respond, to answer. Jesus did not force any of the disciples to follow Him; He did not take the nets out of their hands. They had to lay them down, just as He chose to lay down His life for us. Following His voice was their choice. They could have stayed on the boats and lived the lives that they were used to. Of course, their lives as fishermen, good as they were, would have been nothing in comparison to the incredible lives that they ended up living. Which reminds me of something off the script. Two years ago in January we were in the Holy Land, and last year we were in Rome. We can think of Peter. Had he not responded to Jesus’ invitation, he probably would never have gotten more than 70 miles from the Sea of Galilee. But, because he followed Jesus’ call, he wound up 1400 miles away, twenty times

further than he would have gotten on his own. And rather than having lived the life of an obscure fisherman, on his tomb is built an amazing church building, and we believe, the Church is built upon Him. All because he and the others in today's reading accepted Jesus' invitation to follow Him.

We, too, must respond to God's call. I personally really struggled for a long time to say yes, so I am far from the best example on this point. In today's gospel, as is often the case in the gospels, the yes is a more rapid response: the fishermen put down their nets and left then and there. That being said, it does not always happen that way. In fact, in the seminary class we took on the synoptic gospels (which are Matthew, Mark, and Luke), our professor described how the various evangelists present the callings of the first Apostles in slightly different ways, with the rapidity of the response being one of the variables. Our professor explained that one of the reasons for the slight variations is that each account speaks to different people and their personal experiences with responding to a call. I thought to myself, none of them really fit my response, which was more a case of getting into the boat and heading for the other side of the Lake. And then I realized, even I am covered, my story sounds like the story of Jonah. So even if there is a call to which you have not yet responded, do not fear, God can still use you... in fact, we trust from Romans 8:28 that God can work out all things for good for those who love Him, even our wanderings. That being said, there does come a point when we must decide, and there will be complications in our lives and in the lives of others when we intentionally delay our response, as we learn in the Jonah story.

While I have focused thus far on the gospel reading and perhaps too much on myself in the process, today's insights are ones that are applicable in each of our lives at one point or another. For each one of us was created by God for a unique purpose; a purpose for which He will at some point call us, if He has not already done so. Perhaps a few of you are, or will be, called away from what you are studying here to serve God in a way that is quite different than your MIT coursework. In fact, there have been a surprising number of MIT graduates who are now in some sort of consecrated life. But such a calling is not the case for most of us here. For instance, my sister and her husband, who are here with their kids today, also once were MIT students; in fact, they met through TCC. Back at the parish in Minnesota where I serve there is an 80 year old woman named Gix who was among the first women to graduate from MIT. She is married, has a son who is a priest, and was the lector at the 7 AM Mass I celebrated this morning. She asked me to send her greetings to her *alma mater*. The callings that most here have or will receive may be more traditional, such as hers and those of my sister, but they are nonetheless important. Furthermore, most, if not all of them, will or have included: a change of life entailing sacrifice; a degree of continuity from the past; and a response, a decision that must be made.

In these next few years, you, the current students of MIT, will have many options before you about your respective futures. As some of the literally brightest people in the world, who will graduate from the best engineering school in the world, you will have opportunities now and throughout your lives that few other people will have. You have been richly blessed, and God has blessed you for a purpose. There is a reason you are here: that you are here on Earth, that you are at MIT, that you have been given the gifts you have been given. God wants to help guide you to understanding that reason. God wants each one of us not to make a good decision

about our future or have a good life, but to have a great life... even though that great life will undoubtedly include suffering. It is only when we ultimately follow God's call that we will experience true joy and true peace, for it will be only then that we are the person for which He created us. It is then that we can be truly free. For that I can look at my own life. For a long time I was resistant to the call because of the sacrifices involved. But now hopefully you can see how joyful I am about it. Proof that God knows better what will bring us true joy than we do. While the past nearly 8 months now of priesthood have not been without their challenges nor sacrifices nor frustrations, what has been amazing has been the joy I have experienced, most especially in celebrating Mass and in hearing confessions. When I do that, I have a deep peace that I am finally the man who God made me to be.

It is my hope and prayer that each one of you, in whatever vocation you have been called, for whatever vocation you have been created, will be able to return to MIT someday and say the same thing as I have today about how your life has unfolded with God's guidance and grace after you have laid down your nets and followed Him. Perhaps a few of you will return here as a priest or a nun. But it is also true if you were to return as a great scientist or engineer; as an urban planner or Head of the UN.

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