

“*Follow me.*” In today’s gospel Christ calls us to himself, without conditions, without reservations without pretense he calls us to himself and that is how we are to respond to him, just like Matthew, we are to just get up and ‘follow him’. Jesus also shows us in this short but pithy Gospel that God’s ways are not our ways. Think about it, if you were going to go out and found a Church that would bring God’s salvation and mercy to all mankind, would you pick fishermen and tax collectors, as the people to run your Church? Wouldn’t you, rather seek out the best and brightest you could find? But Christ did not seek out the best and brightest as you and I might, but rather he sought those who were most capable of responding to his love; real, sacrificial, unconditional love. We are not talking about that sickly sweet stuff that Hollywood and Romance novels pawn off as love, but real, gut wrenching, heart breaking, self-sacrificial love. God’s ways are indeed not our ways; he does not pick the great, the powerful and the worldly, he chooses, instead, ordinary folk like you and I, sinners who are perhaps broken and wounded but who are capable of responding to his love and he calls us to become his holy apostles, his prophets, his priests and his disciples.

In the Gospel, the Pharisees saw only that Jesus sat and ate with sinners and tax collectors. His attitude of concern for the refuse of the world was new and it went against their understanding of Israel as a nation set apart, a holy people. They did not understand why Jesus would sit and eat and share fellowship with the great unwashed of the world. But God’s ways are not our ways; he sees the substance where we see only the appearance. Jesus, the Son of God, divine in his own right and own nature came, not to proclaim the righteous but to claim the unrighteous, not to establish a church of saints but to establish a church that transforms sinners into saints. That is why we should not be surprised when we encounter sinners in Christ’s Church. The Catholic Church is not a hotel for saints, but a hospital for

sinners; if you think you are already a saint you might be more comfortable down the street with those who know they are going to heaven!

In his response to the Pharisees Jesus challenges them to understand God's ways, to elevate their eyes and their hearts above the short horizons of this world and to see the distant heavens of God's creation. But the Pharisees didn't get it. They saw themselves as already righteous and holy; they presumed that their righteousness was the fruit of their own labor. They saw themselves as better than others because they obeyed external laws of conduct rather than the interior laws of conscience that form the heart. They considered themselves to be good because of what they did, never stopping to examine who they were on the inside. They are mystified by Jesus' choice of company: "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" Their pride prevents them from seeing his humility, a divine humility that enabled him to share our weakness without succumbing to our sins, thereby enabling us to share in his divinity. He came to us not just to teach us the way but to be the way by which we could return to the Father we had estranged by our arrogance and sinfulness. He humbled himself to be born into poverty and to be baptized by one who was not worthy even to untie his sandals in order to teach us God's infinite mercy and love.

Jesus' answer to the Pharisee's reveals the divine love of God: "*I did not come to call the righteous but sinners.*" Indeed Jesus came to claim what had been lost, the lost sheep of Israel, not just the Israelites of that day, but the lost sheep of every age; those are sick and in need of the divine physician. But the Pharisees did not believe that they were sinners, they did not believe that they needed saving. If we say to ourselves "I don't commit any sins", then we are placing ourselves with the Pharisees. Indeed St John tells us "If we say, 'We are without sin,' we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" and "If we say, 'We have not sinned,' we

make him a liar, and his word is not in us.’ Even a righteous man sins seven times a day so if we say we don’t need to go to confession we deceive ourselves, not God, and it is precisely this kind of self-righteousness that Jesus sought to correct. There is no one who cannot benefit from the graces that Jesus gives us when we go to confession, even if we are not aware of serious personal sin. In the sacrament we humble ourselves before God and place our selves where we belong, in that hospital for sinners where we can be healed of our wounds, strengthened in our weakness and be reconciled with God.

The sacrament of reconciliation is also known as the sacrament of mercy for when Jesus said “*Go and learn the meaning of the words, I desire mercy, not sacrifice*” he was calling us to be merciful that we might receive mercy and he was teaching us the deepest, most profound meaning of God’s law. Jesus insists that we go beyond mere observance of the law and begin to live the law. The only perfect sacrifice is the one the Father asked of Christ offered on the cross, a total offering of sacrificial, unconditional love given for our salvation. The sacrifice that God desires from us is a contrite heart that is humble before God, a heart that knows its sins and sorrows for them, a heart that is filled with love for the one whom God loves, his only begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. What is most pleasing to God is a humble heart like Mary’s so let us turn to our mother and ask her to teach us to love her son as God the Father loves him, as she loves him and as he loves us. Let us be humble before the Lord because he humbled himself for our salvation. Let us repeat in the very depths of our hearts those most precious words of that long ago centurion ‘Lord I am not worthy to enter under your roof, say but the word and my soul will be healed.’