

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

All For Love

There's another of those moments in this Sunday's Gospel which reminds us that we are reading Mark rather than John: *Jesus looked steadily at him and loved him* is a phrase unique in the Gospel tradition. It shows Jesus being *suddenly - and dramatically* - moved by a human encounter. John says of him (Jn 2:25): *Jesus knew all people...he never needed evidence about anyone; he could tell what someone had in him* and (6:64): *Jesus knew from the outset who did not believe and who would betray him*. Here in Mark, Jesus is moving -as we watch - from an authoritative teacher-pupil dialogue to a warmly affectionate response. It is as if he has *found* a potential disciple with great joy. To him he proposes a way of life which is fuller and more demanding than at first: not merely that he should keep the Law, but that he should renounce his possessions and all other ways of thinking about his life, in order to follow Jesus. Jesus asks a personal surrender of great significance, and we are clearly told that this was because Jesus loved him.

All Or Nothing

Once that demand is made, the situation is critical - a judgment-situation. What will the young man say? If he agrees, it will cost him everything, and he will undergo a great loss, which will also afflict his family and their hopes for him. But if he refuses, what will be the consequence? In the event he says no, and the Gospel is eloquent about the result: *his face creases up*: perhaps he frowns, perhaps his face crumples; perhaps there is an echo in our phrase "loss of face"; he is being asked for generosity, and he knows he is going to refuse. In several places the rabbi's writings forbid extreme generosity, "lest you be reduced to poverty yourself, and become dependent on others". Jesus here is effortlessly reversing the prohibition, and the rich man cannot hear him with sympathy. *He went away sad*; this is the inner state of the man, who knows he cannot stay on those conditions. It is a very remarkable moment. Jesus does not ask this kind of renunciation elsewhere in the Gospel; the Twelve are called to *follow* in this way, but most of the people who hear the preaching of Jesus continue in their ordinary way of life afterwards. This rich man was called *especially*, because Jesus had loved him with a unique love. We should take careful note of the personal and special scope of this calling.

What About Us?

I get the sense that, for many parents today, the idea of their offspring's vocation to religious life would get a dusty response, and I can tell that it isn't taking root in the minds of their children. When did you last meet a young nun? Even the priesthood is not flavour of the month in Catholic career-thinking; despite the fact that people believe the priesthood brings people into contact with "real life", and doesn't rob a young person of possessions or some kind of home, the response, I feel, is like the one in the Gospels: a slight frowning of the brow, then a shake of the head, then a going-away: sad? Or at least perplexed? I hope so. The idea that such a summons to follow Christ might be a sign of special love on his part hardly seems to occur to people. *Jesus gazed at him steadily and loved him: and he said: There is one thing you lack*. The psalm says: *One thing I ask of the Lord, to dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life*; and that is the one thing the rich young man lacks, a thing he can only acquire at the cost of all other things: the pearl of great price. It is a moment of great intimacy: it is Jesus' call, his personal word in the ear of this man. It is also quite specific: there's no talk of 'plan B', a second choice that would cost a bit less. So for a priest, I think it is *everything* that is asked, for this calling and no other. Nothing else is asked, and nothing else will do.
Fr Philip