

Today's Readings (13C)
The Freedom of Following Christ

Today's readings focus on two themes: the cost of discipleship and the freedom we enjoy in Christ. On first hearing, there seems to be a tension between these themes. Are we free if we follow Christ in the way of discipleship? Doesn't following somebody result in a loss of personal freedom? Doesn't allegiance to someone, even to Christ, lessen my freedom? I will return to these questions later.

Elisha Leaves Everything Behind

In the first reading taken from the Book of Kings, the prophet Elijah anoints Elisha to be a prophet. Elisha embraces this call to be a prophet so wholeheartedly that he slaughters the yoke of oxen he uses for his plowing, thereby showing that he is leaving behind his old way of life to take on a new way of life.

You Are My Inheritance, O Lord

In today's responsorial psalm we sing, "You are my inheritance, O Lord." This Psalm (Psalm 16) and this response capture the whole-hearted devotion of Elisha that ought to be our own. Elisha has left everything behind because the Lord has become his inheritance. From this moment forward, Elisha will put the whole of his faith and trust in the Lord alone.

Three Would-be Disciples

The episode of Elijah calling Elisha finds an echo in today's gospel. First, a man generously offers to follow Jesus in the way of discipleship. But Jesus does not accept the offer because the man does not understand what he is undertaking. He does not understand that if he follows Jesus he will have no home. Next, Jesus calls someone to follow him, but the man wants to delay his call so that he can bury his father. But the call of discipleship must be answered when it is received, and so this man is also disqualified. Finally, another man volunteers to follow Jesus, but first he wants to say farewell to his family. But Jesus insists that those who look back are not ready for the demands of discipleship. All three fail. They do not understand the demands of discipleship. They want to be disciples on their terms but not on Jesus' terms.

Free to Serve

In today's second reading, from Paul's letter to the Galatians, the great apostle reminds us that Christ set us free so that we might truly be free. He then tells us not to misuse our freedom as an excuse for doing what is wrong. Rather, we are to exercise our freedom by *servicing* each other. What a wonderful image! We are to show our freedom by serving each other in love. Christ has set us free from the great powers of Sin and Death. We are no longer enslaved to them. We don't have to serve them. We can now serve each other in love.

Discipleship and Freedom

Now back to my original question. Is there a tension between following Christ and freedom? Can we truly be free if we give ourselves to Christ? It all depends what you think freedom is. If freedom is doing whatever you want, then the answer to the question is “no.” But if freedom is freedom from sin, freedom not to sin, freedom to serve each other in love, the answer is “yes.” We are most free when we act in love toward each other. We are most free when we follow Christ. For then, and only then, we are free to serve Christ and each other in love. *Father Matera*