

Year C 13th Sunday in Ordinary Time

1 Kgs 19:16b, 19-21; Ps 16; Gal 5:1, 13-18; Lk 9:51-62

Our readings this Sunday have to do with discipleship. Elisha followed Elijah, and Jesus calls on his disciples to follow him with the same, and even greater, wholeheartedness. Elijah and Elisha are examples of whole-hearted devotion to the Lord in the Old Testament. They are obviously unmarried, celibate. It is often asserted that “all” Jewish men were expected to marry, and it is true that the first of the 613 commandments in the Jewish tradition is “be fertile and multiply,” Gn 1:28. But Jeremiah was commanded to do the opposite, Jer 16:2, as a sign for his people of the devastation to come, as Hosea was commanded to marry a “woman of prostitutions” (probably a pagan fertility cult worshipper of Ba‘al), Hos 1:2, as a sign of his people’s infidelity to Yahweh, often described as “prostitution” in the Bible (e.g., Nm 14:33). We saw a couple of Sundays ago how Uriah would not have sex with his wife Bathsheba because he was engaged in “holy war;” the Essenes seemed to have extended this abstinent state for prolonged periods, if not permanently, because they considered themselves to be wholly devoted to the cult and to prophecy and were always ready for the final war between the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness. Something similar may be behind Jesus’ recommendation that whoever is capable of doing so become a “eunuch” for the Kingdom of God, Mt 19:10-12.

So Elisha burns his means of livelihood (like Jesus’ disciples leaving behind their nets, Mt 4:18-22) and follows Elijah. He does get to say goodbye to his parents. Jesus demands more. Even the grave Jewish duty to bury one’s parents must be cast aside in face of the urgency of the Kingdom. The reference to the plow (no one who looks back is fit for the Kingdom) evokes our first reading. But Jesus warns that following him can be precarious: though the foxes have holes and birds their nests, the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head. And yet nothing is lacking to the Lord’s disciples, Lk 22:35, who feel richly blessed, 18:28-30.

What the Lord calls us to is freedom, freedom to love and live a fulfilled life without fear of losing things or feeling that we have to protect ourselves from others or from the future, what Catherine of Siena calls “servile fear.” Life in the Spirit gives us this freedom. It is the freedom of following Christ and trusting in God’s providence, without having to worry about our own

little projects as if they were all up to us and controllable only by us. But this requires the complete determination shown by Christ on his way to Jerusalem (cf. Is 50:7).