



Come After Me

KATHLEEN RUSHTON explains the use of the lectionaries and interprets what is involved in following Jesus in Matthew 16:21-28.

In his inspiring little book, *A Handbook of Spiritual Ecumenism*, Cardinal Walter Kasper writes: “It is significant that Jesus did not primarily express his desire for unity in a teaching or in a commandment but in a prayer to his Father” (Jn 17:21). A fundamental source for prayer and a bond of unity for all Christians are the Scriptures. Later he continues: “It is first of all in the liturgy of the Church that Sacred Scripture is venerated, read and explained.” These readings, which have been “cut” from a larger book, are proclaimed from a lectionary which is a collection of readings arranged in an orderly sequence by a particular faith community for use in its public worship.

Two Lectionaries

Readers will notice below that this reflection for Sunday 3 September is found in two lectionaries. Further, we see a variation in each “cutting” from

the Gospel according to Matthew. My experience of working ecumenically is leading me, where possible, to shape my work on the Sunday Gospels to both the Roman Lectionary of Catholics and the Revised Common Lectionary of many Christian denominations. Let me explain. My passion for writing in these pages on the Sunday Gospels is because it is in the Sunday liturgy that most Christians hear the Word of God.

The revision of the lectionary mandated by the Second Vatican Council in 1963 has proved to be a great gift to all Christians. The Latin edition, the *Ordo Lectionem Missae* of 1969, was a ground-breaking revision of the medieval *Roman Lectionary*. For the first time ever, the Sunday lectionary embraced a three-year cycle with each year dedicated to a particular synoptic gospel – Matthew, Mark, or Luke. Readings from John permeate the sacred liturgical seasons especially at the end of Lent and most of Easter. *The Revised Common Lectionary*, first published in 1992, derives from *The Common Lectionary* of 1983. Both are based on the 1969 *Ordo Lectionem Missae*.

“Ordinary” and “After”

In the main, the gospel readings of the Roman and the Revised Common Lectionaries are similar. While there is no liturgical calendar common to all Christian Churches and communities, all traditions follow a common sequence for the principal Christian feasts such as Christmas, Epiphany, Easter and Pentecost. The *Roman Lectionary* refers to the season which follows Pentecost as “Ordinary Time”, while the *Revised Common Lectionary* names this time as “Sundays after Pentecost.” “Ordinary” and “after” could be thought to mean unimportant or insignificant. Far from it!

After the seasons of the great feasts there is a shift and a change of pace. The prayers and gospel readings have us accompanying Jesus in his public ministry. The Church selects from his healings,

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actions and teachings to remind, affirm, console and challenge us in our living of the Gospel. We hear Jesus tell us to pray, to trust in his care of us, to forgive, to accept others with generosity, to seek peace, to be healed and serve others as instruments of healing, to be humble. Ordinary Time and After are anything but “ordinary” and “after”. This season is extraordinary, essential and fundamental to guiding us on our daily following of Jesus today. The principal Christian feasts are grounded in this season which is about our today. Pope Francis reminds us: “Today does not repeat itself: this is life ... How is my ‘today?’” Let us consider Matthew 16:21-28.

The Galilean Ministry of Jesus

Throughout his early ministry in Galilee, Jesus teaches, heals and reconciles (Mt 4:12-10:42). While some believe in him, for most Jesus is not the Messiah they were expecting so he experiences hostility and rejection (Mt 11:1-16:12). We enter the section of Matthew where a new direction unfolds as Jesus journeys to Jerusalem (Mt 16:13-20:34). In Matthew 16:21, we are told explicitly: “Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem” and in the first of three times he tells them that there at the hands of the elders, chief priests and scribes, he will undergo great suffering, be killed and be raised on the third day (Mt 17:22-23; 20:17-19).

Peter objects strongly. He rebukes Jesus with the very same word Jesus used to rebuke the waves (Mt 8:26). Jesus calls Peter not only “Satan” but “a stumbling block” (*skandalon*), a cause of sin. Peter is distracting Jesus from God’s purposes in a way which parallels Satan’s earlier temptations (Mt 4:1-11). Peter, “the rock” (Mt 16:18) who falters when faced with this stumbling block, contrasts with the Peter who after his confession of faith Jesus declared: “Blessed are you” (Mt 16:17).

To become my followers means literally “to come after me” or “to get behind me”. The present tense here indicates a continuous state of existence, a continuous way of being as when one goes behind Jesus walking in his tracks. This phrase, “to come after me/get behind me”, is very close to the one found in Jesus’ authoritative call of the disciples (Mt 4:18-22). They responded immediately, at considerable social and economic cost, to the call to be part of building an alternative community in the imperial world around them.

Jesus’ Scandalous Call

We need to be clear that denial of self is not just giving up certain things or blotting out joy and fulfilment in life. It is a choice to lose oneself entirely in Jesus, to live his way, to be part of his mission and take on his identity as one’s very own. Each follower will confront certain suffering because of the choice to follow/get behind a Messiah such as Jesus.

Loyalty to Jesus meant not just division in the family or household but social conflict. To take up their cross suggests an array of factors dulled by centuries of spiritualised

Christian piety about “the cross” which is divorced from the social and political reality of the world of Jesus. As used by Rome, crucifixion was a cruel means of execution imposed on conquered peoples, foreigners, criminals and slaves. It divided citizen from non-citizen, and those accepted socially from the socially rejected and excluded. Crucifixion in public places served to discourage non-compliant behaviour. This is the very real background to Jesus’ scandalous call to risk all, even to death.

Jesus’ call is to choose a way of marginalisation, to be one with people who are nobodies (like slaves) and be regarded as one cursed. It is to identify with those who resist the control of the empire, who challenge or threaten its interests and with those who contest its vision of reality. To identify with the cross is not to glorify or sentimentalise this violent symbol but to reframe and subvert its meaning as Jesus does. Whenever his suffering and death is spoken of it is not in a duo but always a trio, a threesome – his suffering, his death and his resurrection. His death and resurrection in the four Gospels and all New Testament writings are found in such close proximity that it has been suggested that this unity be shown by hyphenating his death-resurrection.

As I accompany Jesus in his ministry how do his words remind, affirm, console and challenge me in my answering his call to come after me/to get behind me? “How is my ‘today?’” ■



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Matthew 16:21–28 3 September:

Matthew 16:21-27 22nd Sunday Ordinary Time (Roman Lectionary). Matthew 16:21-28 13th Sunday after Pentecost (Revised Common Lectionary)