

## WHO WOULD YOU BE IF YOU EVER BECAME FULLY YOURSELF?

Jeremiah 20. 7-13

Romans 6. 1b-11

Matthew 10. 24-39

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

I wonder, who would you be if you ever became fully yourself? What new possibilities might arise? How would your relationships change? What fears would disappear? How do you imagine your life would be different?

I'm not talking about a selfish attitude toward others and the world. I am talking about living into our better and truer selves; about being real and authentic; about experiencing wholeness and integrity; and then taking all of that, all that we are and all that we have, and offering it to our relationships, to the world and to our Lord.

Who would you be if you ever became fully yourself? I think that this is one of the questions that lies beneath today's gospel passage; it points to something that we all long for.

Do you remember what it was like growing up? ...The questions, the struggles, the fears, the hopes, the dreams, the failures and doubts, the relationships? I remember it as clearly as if it was yesterday. Do you know why? Because it *was* yesterday and it *is* today. Growing up isn't only about children becoming adults. It is a life-long process; and growing up at any age, at every age, is often hard work. I think that is what Jesus is getting at in today's gospel text.

We often hear that the gospel is a prescribed set of beliefs, teachings and behaviours; but what if there is more to the gospel, more to life, and more to you and me than

that? What if the gospel is a *path* toward becoming *more fully ourselves* and what if Christ is a symbol of what that fullness looks like?

That path, however, is not necessarily easy or comfortable. Today's gospel passage contains one of our Lord's 'hard sayings' and we must be careful not to soften it, spiritualise it, or manipulate it in an attempt to make it more acceptable and palatable. Rather, we must take it seriously, listen deeply and open ourselves to the work that it sets before us. And what is that work? That work is the work of *separation*. Jesus puts it like this:

'Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household' (Matthew 10. 34-36).

The sword that Christ brings is the sword of separation. It is neither a rejection of family and relationships, nor is it destructive of life. Rather, our Lord's sword of separation is generative of life and relationships. It unbinds, frees and brings about the 'separateness' necessary for growing up and finding life. 'Those who find their life will lose it', Jesus says, 'and those who lose their life for my sake' – that is, those who separate from their old life and ways – 'will find it' (Matthew 10. 39).

Separation is necessary for the creation of life<sup>1</sup> and for that life to grow, whether it is physical, emotional or spiritual. It is at the heart of our growing up and becoming more fully ourselves. Let me give you a few examples of what I am talking about.

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<sup>1</sup> As told in Genesis 1, the act of creation was an act of separation. In the beginning God separated the light from the darkness and later, the day from the night. Similarly, biologists tell us that reproduction and growth are processes of cells dividing and separating.

- The day that you were born, you separated from your mother's womb, a first and necessary step in becoming more fully yourself.
- How old were you when you realised that at least some of your parents' ideas, beliefs and ways were not your own? That was about your separation and growing up.
- Moving out of your parents' home to begin work or to go to school is a separation by which you sought to become more fully yourself.
- The question 'Will you marry me?' is an invitation to separate and begin a new life.
- The significant transitions in our lives – birth, marriage, divorce, a new job, retirement and even death – are about the separation that takes us to a new life, even when it is painful or unwanted.
- Matthew got up and left his tax booth in order to follow Christ (Matthew 9. 9). James and John separated from their father, their boat and nets to become followers of our Lord (Matthew 4. 21-22; Mark 1. 19). Two disciples left John the Baptist and followed Jesus (John 1. 35-37). They all chose a path of *separation* in order to more fully become themselves. That's what discipleship is about.

Separateness is the freedom to think our own thoughts, hear our own voices, discern our own concerns, establish our own values and chart our own life's path.<sup>2</sup> As Christians, we have chosen to do that in relationship with Christ. Separateness heightens our very awareness of being alive. Separation can help us hear the quiet call of God within us and lead us to greater maturity.

So let me ask you again. Who would you be if you ever became fully yourself, if you lived into God's dream for you and your life?

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<sup>2</sup> Even Jesus himself chose separation. When he was twelve years old he separated himself from Mary and Joseph to stay behind and remain in his Father's house. At the end of that story Luke comments, 'And Jesus increased in wisdom and years, and in divine and human favour' (Luke 2. 52).

From whom or what do we need to separate, not as a rejection of them but as a reclaiming of ourselves? Is it a particular person, a voice or an experience from the past, or a fear? What do we need to let go of, to separate from, in order to grow up and come alive?

Our Lord is not asking us to abandon our relationships, but rather to reorient our lives, to become more fully ourselves and to find our life and identity in him.

If our relationship with God isn't deepening and growing, maybe some sort of separation is in order. If our relationships with others aren't changing and giving life, perhaps some sort of separation is in order. If we feel stuck and find that we are repeating the same behaviours and patterns, the sword of Christ just might be the antidote. Jesus's sword of separation gives new life. It's what allows us to ask and answer, and re-ask and re-answer the question, 'Who would I be if I ever became fully myself?'

In Judaism a story is told of Rabbi Zusha, who lay crying on his deathbed. His students asked him, 'Rabbi, why are you so sad? After all the good deeds you have done, you will surely get a great reward in heaven!' 'I'm afraid!' said Zusha. 'Because when I get to heaven, I know God's not going to ask me "Zusha, why weren't you more like Moses?" or "Why weren't you more like King David?" I'm afraid that God will say, "Zusha, why weren't you more like Zusha?" And then what will I say?!'

What about you and me? What will we say? What separation do we need today to take a next step into becoming more fully ourselves?

Amen.