

Homily for the Eve of the Feast of St Andrew, Apostle

*A sermon preached in the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament,
Pusey House Oxford, at the Low Mass on Wednesday 29th
November 2023 (The Eve of the Feast of St Andrew,
Apostle) by The Reverend Nigel Palmer, Honorary
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1 ROMANS 10.9-END; MATTHEW 4.18-22

THE sheer lists of things in the New Testament are sometimes daunting to the modern ear. We are not used in our information lite world to having to concentrate on sizeable lists of names, even if they are flagged by generic descriptions like “*the book of the generation of Our Lord Jesus Christ*” and of course the lists of virtues which St Paul loves to enumerate for his hearers. Such list making follows the traditions of the Old Testament, and indeed, the rabbinical traditions in which knowledge was wisdom, and one way in which you demonstrated the extent of your wisdom was to impress your students and hearers with the full blast of your command of detailed place names and things- a rhetorical device not unknown I suspect in Oxford lecture halls today.

So it is very easy, when we hear the list of the names of the apostles, which the Gospel writers are careful to give us, for us to shut our ears to the individuals who are named in the roll call of their names, in which they become merely “*the glorious company of the apostles*”. But we should not shut our ears, because the Gospel writers are not concerned to give us details of each and everyone of the twelve (other than, ironically, Judas Iscariot, “*who betrayed Him*” in the manner of FaceBook profiles. Their concern is a great deal more subtle than that, and we have an instance of such subtlety in this evening’s reading from the New Testament. We perhaps forget that the Greek word for apostles was derived from the verb *apostello*- “*I send*”. And in His very first words to the brothers Simon and Andrew, Our Lord calls them to follow Him, not because He wants an audience, or followers to boost his own mission to the people of Israel, or to collect

money for the relief of the poor and homeless. No, He says “*Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.*” And straightway, we are told, they left their nets and followed Him- although one wonders what was in their hearts and minds when they did so. Did they realise that they were taking their first footsteps on the long weary road to martyrdom, Simon in Rome, and Andrew, it is said, in Patras, both a long, long way from the Sea of Galilee. But whatever they understood at that first call, it could not be said that Our Lord left them in any doubt, as to what their rôle in their new lives was to be. They were to be sent, the first of the apostles, to capture the minds and hearts of those whom they encountered for the sake of the magnetic personality of the person who had dropped by their nets and for whom they were moved instinctively and mysteriously to follow.

Jesus’s disciples do not, on the whole, get a good press in the Gospels. They are often almost wilfully misunderstanding of their Master, what He represented, and how they should serve Him- it is only later, in the Acts of the Apostles that the true qualities, which caused them to be singled out on that memorable day by the Sea of Galilee, become apparent. But their call to mission proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ, that mission was there, explicit from their beginning. We are, in all the complications of our modern life, surrounded by a multiplicity of complicated ethical and political decisions. But we must not forget, in finding our way through that world, that our first task as Christians, as St Paul put it to the Philippians, is to be “*blameless and harmless, the sons of God without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world; Holding forth the word of life...*” We must not forget that our call to a spiritual life, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, must always be accompanied by a call to our fellow men and women in this fallen world, to invite them to share in that grace, and in that life. It can be made to others in many ways, according to our own special gifts, as St Paul recognised in his First Letter to the Corinthians. But without the continual urging of that invitation, this world will not be redeemed. The later lives of the apostles, whether they be pious myths or based upon honourable tradition, show they understood that, and that they understood the Great Commission, which Christ gives to all of us at the end of Matthew’s Gospel, to “*go and teach all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost,*

teaching them to observe all things which I have commanded you.”
Nor should we hesitate, any more than Simon and Andrew did, for we have Our Lord’s promise that He is, after all, with us “*always, even unto the end of the world.*”

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.