

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN – THE FIRST DISCIPLES

We must go back to our Lord whom we left in the desert surrounded by Angels.

Coming down the mountain side He made His way again to the bank of the Jordan where John was still preaching and baptizing. The crowds were greater than ever and more enthusiastic. John, they said, was either Christ or Elias who was to announce His Coming. At last the great Council of the nation, called the Sanhedrin, determined to find out the truth. They therefore sent messengers to the Baptist to ask him: "Who art thou?" "I am not the Christ," he said. "What, then; art thou Elias?" "I am not," he replied. "Art thou the Prophet?" He answered: "No." "Who art thou, that we may give an answer to them that sent us?"

"I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Make straight the way of the Lord, as the prophet Isaias said." And they asked him: "Why then dost thou baptize if thou be not Christ nor Elias nor the Prophet?"

John answered them saying : "I baptize in water, but there hath stood One in the midst of you whom you know not. The same is He that shall come after Me, who is preferred before Me, the latchet of whose shoe I am not worthy to loose." If we want to see a perfect servant of God, we have only to look at St. John. For months the stream of people, rich and poor, learned and simple, had been coming and going; his name was in every mouth, everyone wanted to see him, hear him, show him reverence. But he cared nothing for all this homage. His one thought was his Master, to turn the minds of the people from himself and fix them upon Him, to hand over his own disciples to Him at the first opportunity. This came at last.

One day he saw Jesus coming towards him. Turning to those who stood about, he said: "Behold the Lamb of God, behold Him who taketh away the sin of the world, this is the Son of God."

The next day he was standing with two of his disciples when Jesus passed by: "Behold the Lamb of God," he said again, as he pointed Him out to them. Everyone is attracted by a lamb. St. John wanted to draw the hearts of his disciples to Jesus, so he called Him by this name. Yet not "Lamb" only, but "Lamb of God," for they must know who He was, and worship as well as love Him. "Behold the Lamb of God !" The priest says these words to us just before Holy Communion, that we may not be frightened of Him who comes to us, and on the other hand that he may not thoughtlessly forget how great and holy Life is. In every Mass, at the end of every litany, the Church calls upon our Lord by this beautiful name of His, "the Lamb of God." He has many names, and among them some are His favourite the Holy Name, " JESUS," that is Saviour, " Jesus of Nazareth," "Son of David," "the Lamb." It is by this last name that St. John the Evangelist calls Him when he sees Him in His glory. He tells us that he saw " a great multitude whom no man could number, of all nations and tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the Throne of God and in sight of the

Lamb," to show us what a happiness it is to be where we can see face to face and to our heart's content our dear and gentle Lord. Among these blessed ones he saw some specially favoured " who follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth."

It was these words : "Behold the Lamb of God," that won the hearts of the disciples. They looked earnestly, and drawn they knew not how, followed Him. He turned and, seeing them following, said graciously:

"What seek you ?"

" Rabbi, where dwellest Thou ? " they answered timidly, not knowing what else to say.

"Come and see," He replied.

They followed Him joyfully now, and He took them to a little hut or shelter He had on the river bank. It was about four in the afternoon, "and they stayed with Him that day," says one of them who has left us the account. This one was John the Evangelist, called later "the Disciple whom Jesus loved." The other was Andrew, a fisherman who lived on the shore of the Lake of Genesareth.

It seems that they stayed with our Lord not only the rest of that day but the following night. What they said to Him and He to them we are not told, but when day was come and they took their leave, our Lord had gained His first two disciples, the oldest and the youngest of the Twelve Apostles. From what they had seen and heard they were quite sure that this was He who was come, and they went off at once to tell their brothers.

Andrew found his first:

"We have found the Messiah ! " he exclaimed joyfully. And he brought him to Jesus. St. John seems to have been present at the interview, for he tells us very carefully what happened. Jesus, looking upon the newcomer, said:

"Thou art Simon, the son of Jona, thou shalt be called Cephas" (which is, interpreted, Peter).

Well might our Lord look earnestly upon that weather-beaten, eager face, all aglow with expectation. Here was His first Vicar upon earth, the Rock on which He was to build His Church. He looked, and thought of all He was to be to Peter and Peter to Him, of the long line of successors this Galilean fisherman was to have, of all they would gather into their net and land safely on the eternal Shore.

Those who heard these words of our Lord must have been startled. A Jewish name was not given lightly as ours often are, for the sake of the sound, or because one of the family has borne it before. It was intended to show the character or the calling of the person who bore it. To change a name was to show a change of position or of office. It was an important act, and allowed only to the rulers among the Jews.

Now here was One who, on seeing this fisherman for the first time, not only told him his name and his father's, but changed his name from Simon, which means " Son of a dove," to Peter, which means " a Rock." Andrew and John looked at one another in astonishment.

What such a change meant they could not tell, but they did not forget it. New disciples as they came in were told about it, and Peter at once came to be looked upon as the first and chief among them. The Evangelists, who have written the Gospel story, all name him first in their lists of the Apostles. He was not the oldest, not the first called, but he was "the Rock."

Simon, Andrew and John had like so many others left their homes in Galilee to come down to Judea that they might hear the preaching of John the Baptist. The fourth disciple, Philip of Bethsaida, was another Galilean fisherman. He came from the village of Simon and Andrew on the shore of the Lake. The day after His words to Peter our Lord was returning with His little company to Galilee when "He found Philip," says St. John. To the disciples this

meeting first with one then with another of them might seem to be chance. But there is no chance with God. Each of this chosen band was sought out by the Master, and at the right moment found. Looking on Philip He said to him: "Follow Me." Two words, but enough. Philip followed, and was so happy in the company of his new Master that he could not rest till he had made Him known to a friend of his named Nathaniel. Nathaniel was sitting alone under a fig tree when Philip broke in upon his solitude exclaiming joyfully:

"We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and the prophets did speak, Jesus of Nazareth." "Of Nazareth." His little speech could scarcely have had a more unfortunate ending, the effect of the good news was spoilt completely. "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" Nathaniel replied coldly. "Come and see," was the answer. It took some persuasion, but at length the two were on their way to our Lord. When they had come up to Him He said in the hearing of Nathaniel: "Behold an Israelite indeed in whom there is no guile." Nathaniel in amazement replied: "Whence knowest Thou me?" Jesus looking upon him said: "Before that Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig-tree, I saw thee."

The fig-tree was a long way off, and what had happened there we do not know. Perhaps Nathaniel had been praying to see the Messiah before he died, and be numbered amongst His followers. Any way there had been some act or thought which God alone could know. Who was this Stranger that in that secret place had seen him and read his heart? Nathaniel was a man without guile, that is without cunning or deceit. He only wanted to know what was right, and seeing what a mistake he had made he owned it at once: "Rabbi," he exclaimed, "Thou art the Son of God, Thou art the King of Israel." Jesus answered: "Because I said unto Thee: I saw thee under the fig-tree thou believest? greater things than these shalt thou see."

Many believed Nathaniel to be the same as St. Bartholomew the Apostle. "Bar" means "Son," "Bar-Tolmai" means "Son of Tolmai." The full name may have been Nathaniel Bar-Tolmai, just as we have Simon Bar-Jona. One reason for this belief is that in the lists of the Twelve Apostles Philip and Bartholomew are always put together