The Journey and the Voice

On 19th February 842 in the Church of the Holy Wisdom in Constantinople the holy icons were restored to churches after the resurgence of the iconoclasm which had plagued the eastern churches for 55 years after the 7th Ecumenical Council in 787 A.D. In 843 A.D. the Synod of Constantinople decreed that the First Sunday of Great Lent should celebrate the Triumph of the Orthodox faith and the restoration of the holy images to its temples. However, before this time and decision the theme of this Sunday had been the coming of Christ in the fulfilment of prophecy.

The readings and the hymns for today still reflect that earlier tradition. Clearly, the Church, in not providing a revised lectionary, intended that we should still refer to this ancient theme; and for good reason! Great Lent marks the "home run" in the long period of preparation and instruction undertaken by the catechumens prior to their baptism at Pascha, and still does for those adults seeking baptism or chrismation today. It was and is essential for them (and indeed for us) to know that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah as the prophets had foretold since only in this way could they (and us) truly accept that Jesus is "The Way, the Truth and the Life." (John 14:6). The Messiah to come, the Christ, was the great hope of the prophets and this is affirmed by the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews in the Apostle today. *"And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us."* (Hebrews 11:39-40).

DISCUSSION WITH THE CHILDREN: "THINGS WORTH WAITING FOR."

OBJECTIVE – JESUS IS WORTH WAITING FOR AS WE SEEK HIM OUT.

In the Gospel appointed for today the calling of St. Philip and his friend St. Nathaniel is crucially informed by this prophetic hope. It really mattered to these two men, as so it should, that Jesus was the promised one of God. The first contact with them was made by Jesus himself, seeking St. Philip out. Christ knew that Philip was already well established on his spiritual journey toward the Kingdom of God so he immediately called him to follow without the usual and preparatory "come and see." The invitation to come and share in Christ's life and teaching had been the appropriate initiative for both the first-called disciple, Andrew and then his friend, Simon Peter for whom he had passed on the invitation. All had to be accomplished in the right order of course, as St. John Chrysostom and St. Theophylact make clear in their commentaries on the Gospel of St. John.

> Observe, He did not call them, before some had of their own accord joined Him: for had He invited them, before any had joined Him, perhaps they would have started back: but now having determined to follow of their own free choice, they remain firm ever after. He calls Philip, however, because he would be known to him, from living in Galilee. But what made Philip follow Christ? Andrew heard from John the Baptist, and Peter from Andrew; he had heard from no one, and yet on Christ saying, Follow Me, was persuaded instantly. It is not improbable that Philip may have heard John: and yet it may have been the mere voice of Christ which produced this effect.
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> (St. John Chrysostom)

> For the voice of Christ sounded not like a common voice to some, that is, the faithful, but kindled in their inmost soul the love of Him. Philip having been continually meditating on Christ, and reading the books of Moses, so confidently expected Him, that the instant he saw, he believed. Perhaps too he had heard of Him from Andrew and Peter, coming from the same district; an

> explanation which the Evangelist seems to hint at, when he adds, Now Philip was of Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter.
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> (St. Theophylact)

The dialogue between St. Philip and his friend St. Nathanael in the Gospel concerning Jesus is instructive. Both of them are making good progress spiritually but both still have misunderstandings or difficulties with question of Jesus's identity. For St. Philip Jesus is the Christ because he recognises in Him the One written about by Moses and other prophets in the Torah and other writings; but he still refers to him in the human sense at the "son of Joseph." (John 1:45). St. Nathanael is initially incredulous: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). St. Nathanael knows that according to prophecy the Christ will be born of Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). He has not, as yet, received Jesus's full CV or resume so St. Philip doesn't argue the point but rather commends the path appropriate for all seekers: "Come and see." This indeed is St. John Chrysostom's account of the matter:

> Nathanael knew from the Scriptures, that Christ was to come from Bethlehem, according to the prophecy of Micah, And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, - out of you shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel. On hearing of Nazareth, then, he doubted, and was not able to reconcile Philip's tidings with prophecy. For the Prophets call Him a Nazarene, only in reference to His education and mode of life. Observe, however, the discretion and gentleness with which he communicates his doubts. He does not say, You deceive me, Philip; but simply asks the question, Can any good thing come out of Nazareth? Philip too in turn is equally discrete. He is not confounded by the question, but dwells upon it, and lingers in the hope of bringing him to Christ: Philip said to him, Come and see. He takes him to Christ, knowing that when he had once tasted of His words and doctrine, he will make no more resistance.

I am not going to proceed further with the text for we have enough to discover our main lesson today in the calling of these two great saints, Philip and Nathanael. We observe first that St. Philip was already some way along his own journey of faith when Jesus sought him out. To him He said: "Follow me." Nathanael had perhaps not made so much progress, maybe on account of simple ignorance or perhaps because his more literal frame of mind having got stuck on the issue of the Jesus's home town rather than his place of birth. Philip uses Christ's own seeker method for his friend Nathanael, which St. Andrew the First Called had also employed in recruiting Simon Peter - "Come and see."

As members of the Church, growing ourselves in the quality and depth of both discipleship and evangelism, we need to learn which response, "Come and see" or "Follow me [Christ]" applies in any given case both to ourselves and to others. "Come and see" is for the seeker, the explorer, the learner. "Follow me [Christ]" is for the penitent, the responder, the disciple. Of course, both states apply to all of us in differing degrees all the time but we need also to listen to the Holy Spirit to determine which is being said to us and to others with appropriate emphasis right here and now.

Getting this wrong, missing either the journey or the voice or both, can be disastrous. I have known, for example, catechumens who have, perhaps unconsciously, refused to budge from the "Come and See" phase. Their inertia is usually rationalised and justified on the pretext that they can always find some awkward issue that they have not yet got quite straightened out; just like St. Nathanael in fact with his Bethlehem / Nazareth conundrum. These are the procrastinators who are being called by God to make a decision and do at least *something* about their call. There is no guile in them,

just a little unnecessary anxiety! Others jump too quickly into responding without fully appreciating the consequences of the call to follow Christ. Classically of course this applies to St. Peter, whose overconfidence in himself, born out of self-ignorance, would first have to be broken by his bitter experience of denying Christ three times. These are the impetuous ones who need to learn discretion and self-knowledge. Having learned these things, however, such become rock-like in their faith and leaders of men.

Perhaps we can recognise both tendencies within each of us. Sometimes we need to curb our enthusiasm and sit down to learn more about God and ourselves. Sometimes we need to be shaken by the Holy Spirit out of our godless anxiety or pointless arguments and set on active course toward the Kingdom of God; following Christ on the way as the Way and each carrying our own cross as we go. Certainly, as witnesses to Christ to others, we need to pray to the Holy Spirit for discernment as to whether someone needs to begin or continue upon their journey ("come and see"), or instead perhaps needs to stop dithering and get on with their discipleship in obedience to the voice of Christ Himself, ("follow me").

"Come and see" or "follow me" – whichever it is to be, let us hear attentively and respond faithfully to our call from God.