



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 22 March 2006

'Witnesses of Christ'

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The Letter to the Ephesians presents the Church to us as a structure built "upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone" (Eph 2: 20). In the Book of Revelation the role of the Apostles, and more specifically, of the Twelve, is explained in the eschatological perspective of the heavenly Jerusalem, presented as a city whose walls "had twelve foundations, and on them the twelve names of the Twelve Apostles of the Lamb" (21: 14).

The Gospels agree in mentioning that the call of the Apostles marked the first steps of Jesus' ministry, after the baptism he received from John the Baptist in the waters of the Jordan.

According to the accounts of Mark (1: 16-20) and of Matthew (4: 18-22), the scene of the call of the first Apostles is the Sea of Galilee. Jesus had just begun to preach about the Kingdom of God when his gaze came to rest upon two sets of brothers: Simon and Andrew, and James and John. They were fishermen busy with their daily work, casting their nets and mending them.

But it was another sort of fishing that awaited them. Jesus purposefully called them and they promptly followed him: subsequently, they were to become "fishers of men" (cf. Mk 1: 17; Mt 4: 19). Luke, while following the same tradition, gave a more elaborate account (5: 1-11).

Luke's account illustrates the development of the first disciples' faith, explaining that Jesus' invitation to follow him came after they had heard his first preaching and had seen the first

miraculous signs that he worked. The miraculous catch in particular was the immediate context, and it gave its symbol to the mission of fishers of men that was entrusted to them. The destiny of those who were "called" would henceforth be closely bound to that of Jesus. An apostle is one who is sent, but even before that he is an "expert" on Jesus.

This very aspect is highlighted by the Evangelist John from Jesus' very first encounter with the future Apostles. Here the scene is different. The meeting takes place on the banks of the Jordan. The presence of the future disciples, who, like Jesus, also came from Galilee to receive the baptism administered by John, sheds light on their spiritual world.

They were men who were waiting for the Kingdom of God, anxious to know the Messiah whose coming had been proclaimed as imminent. It was enough for John the Baptist to point out Jesus to them as the Lamb of God (cf. Jn 1: 36), to inspire in them the desire for a personal encounter with the Teacher.

The lines of Jesus' conversation with the first two future Apostles are most expressive. To his question "What do you seek?", they replied with another question: "'Rabbi' (which means Teacher), where are you staying?". Jesus' answer was an invitation: "Come and see" (cf. Jn 1: 38-39). Come, so that you will be able to see.

This is how the Apostles' adventure began, as an encounter of people who are open to one another. For the disciples, it was the beginning of a direct acquaintance with the Teacher, seeing where he was staying and starting to get to know him. Indeed, they were not to proclaim an idea, but to witness to a person.

Before being sent out to preach, they had to "be" with Jesus (cf. Mk 3: 14), establishing a personal relationship with him. On this basis, evangelization was to be no more than the proclamation of what they felt and an invitation to enter into the mystery of communion with Christ (cf. I Jn 1: 1-3).

To whom would the Apostles be sent? In the Gospel Jesus seemed to limit his mission to Israel alone: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel" (Mt 15: 24). In a similar way he seemed to restrict the mission entrusted to the Twelve: "These Twelve Jesus sent out, charging them: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt 10: 5ff.).

A certain rationally inspired modern criticism saw these words as showing a lack of universal awareness by the Nazarene. Actually, they should be understood in the light of his special relationship with Israel, the community of the Covenant, in continuity with the history of salvation.

According to the Messianic expectation, the divine promises directly addressed to Israel would reach fulfilment when God himself had gathered his people through his Chosen One as a

shepherd gathers his flock: "I will save my flock, they shall no longer be a prey.... I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them; he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the Lord, shall be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them" (Ez 34: 22-24).

Jesus is the eschatological shepherd who gathers the lost sheep of the house of Israel and goes in search of them because he knows and loves them (cf. Lk 15: 4-7, Mt 18: 12-14; cf. also the figure of the Good Shepherd in Jn 10: 11ff.). Through this "gathering together", the Kingdom of God is proclaimed to all peoples: "I will set my glory among the nations; and all the nations shall see my judgment which I have executed, and my hand which I have laid on them" (Ez 39: 21). And Jesus followed precisely this prophetic indication. His first step was to "gather together" the people of Israel, so that all the people called to gather in communion with the Lord might see and believe.

Thus, the Twelve, taken on to share in the same mission as Jesus, cooperate with the Pastor of the last times, also seeking out the lost sheep of the house of Israel, that is, addressing the people of the promise whose reunion is the sign of salvation for all peoples, the beginning of the universalization of the Covenant.

Far from belying the universal openness of the Nazarene's Messianic action, the initial restriction to Israel of his mission and of the Twelve thus becomes an even more effective prophetic sign. After Christ's passion and Resurrection, this sign was to be made clear: the universal character of the Apostles' mission was to become explicit. Christ would send the Apostles "to the whole creation" (Mk 16: 15), to "all nations", (Mt 28: 19, Lk 24: 47), "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1: 8).

And this mission continues. The Lord's command to gather the peoples together in the unity of his love still continues. This is our hope and also our mandate: to contribute to this universality, to this true unity in the riches of cultures, in communion with our true Lord Jesus Christ.

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To special groups

I offer a warm welcome to the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience, including the various student groups. May your time in Rome strengthen your love of the universal Church and deepen your commitment to witness to the "Good News" of Jesus Christ. Upon you and your families I cordially invoke God's abundant Blessings of joy and peace.

Lastly, my thoughts turn to the *young people*, so numerous here - we can see and hear how numerous they are! -, to the *sick* and to the *newly-weds*. In the spiritual atmosphere of Lent in which we are living, a time of conversion and reconciliation, I invite you to follow the example of Jesus the Teacher in order to faithfully proclaim his saving message.

The day after tomorrow, 24 March, will be the *United Nations' World Day for the Fight against Tuberculosis*. I hope for a renewed commitment at the global level, so that there may be available the necessary resources to treat those sick with this disease, notoriously associated with poverty. I encourage initiatives of assistance and solidarity for these patients who need help to live their condition with dignity.

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