

## Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Psalm 24

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

Mark 1:14-20

I love hearing the Gospel accounts of the calling of the first disciples. I often imagine the thrill among those being called—probably a mixture of excitement and fear—not knowing what lies ahead of them, and knowing that life as they knew it would probably never be the same again.

We can see in the response of those he calls the immense attractiveness of his call – that in spite of their fears, the call of Christ is irresistible; that deep-down it resonates with what they’ve always wanted. For a similar reason, I also love reading the conversion stories of the saints through the centuries – seeing the various ways in which Christ breaks through their fears and complacency, and leads his faithful to the fulness of life for which we were always made.

Of course, the life of Christian discipleship is certainly not without its difficulties—indeed, Christ promised us that we would experience our share of the cross in this life—and so it can be beneficial to call to mind these powerful moments of conversion from time to time, to remind us of why we got started along this sometimes-challenging road in the first place.

With this in mind, I thought that today I would share a story from my own call to follow Christ. Some of you may have heard this story before, but I suspect many of you haven’t.

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Well, as you may know, in my mid-twenties I went travelling for a year – not so much to see sights, but more as a time of discernment. Having done a variety of things since high school—none of which lasted terribly long—I was feeling the need for some long-term direction. I saw this year away as a chance for some space away from friends and family and their expectations, so as to let God get at me. My hope was that, by the end of year, God would have revealed to me what I was meant to do with my life long-term.

Well, fast-forward ten months into that year away, and I found myself in the U.S. in the midst of a thirty-day silent retreat, known as the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius. The year had already proved to be quite fruitful, and I was increasingly considering the idea of some kind of religious vocation. But I had little clarity or certainly about the specifics of what God was asking of me, and with the year fast approaching it’s end I guess you could say I was starting to get a bit anxious about it.

I hadn't initially planned on doing the thirty-day retreat during my year away, but other plans had fallen through and the retreat just seemed to fall into place. I should note that the *Spiritual Exercises* are quite intense, with several lengthy periods of guided mental prayer each day, and the only conversation being a daily visit with a spiritual director.

Suffice to say, all that inner work can be quite draining, so you really need some kind of physical outlet. I tried to go for daily walks, but I was in Phoenix in the middle of summer, which is stinking hot – even hotter than summer here in Perth. I tried getting up early or staying up late, but it was messing with my sleep, so in the end they gave me a key to the hall next door to where I was staying which had a piano in it, and so going in there and beating up on the old piano became my outlet. Maybe not entirely in the spirit of a silent retreat, but they said it was okay.

Well, one day I was in there, and I happened to be playing a song that had the word “goodbye” in it, and before long I noticed a few tears welling up beneath the surface. I was a little surprised, because it didn't seem particularly related to anything I'd been going through in the retreat. Upon finishing the song, I decided to stay with the theme, and after doodling on the keys for a while I started writing a simple song essentially based around the word “goodbye”. Again, I wasn't entirely sure if this was something I should have been focusing on, but the latent tears sure seemed an indication of \*something\*.

I threw together a rough version of the song in about thirty minutes—which is the quickest I've ever written a song—and after doing an initial recording of it I decided to take a little break. I had some rubbish left-over from lunch, so I went to throw it in the bin outside, and as I lifted the lid of the bin—I kid you not—looking right at me from inside the bin was this note.



Just to clarify: no, the note wasn't framed when I found it (I did that later); yes, it was just sitting there on top of a pile of rubbish, looking right at me; and yes, coming thirty seconds after writing a song called "Goodbye", I couldn't believe what I was looking at.

Needless to say, by now God had my full attention. As I sat with it all some more, I started to see the relevance of all this to my year away. By this stage, I knew enough of the general direction in which I was being led to know a number of things that I \*wasn't\* going to do with my life. And this whole experience with the song seemed to be saying that I wouldn't be shown the specifics of what I was meant to do with my life until I had let go those things that I wasn't going to do. As the line in the chorus said, "Goodbye to the life I might have led; I'm going with something else instead."

So that evening I settled in with my new "goodbye" note and song, and I started going through all the things I might have liked to do with my life that probably weren't going to happen – and those tears that had been gathering under the surface started pouring out. I said goodbye to the family I wasn't going to have. I said goodbye to dreams of a music career or athletic stardom, or any number of other things.

Then I started going through all the various mistakes I'd made in my life, wrong turns, people I'd hurt, grudges I'd held – and one-by-one asked God for forgiveness and to help me let them go too. After a couple of hours of non-stops tears I eventually went to bed physically and emotionally wiped-out.

When I woke up the next morning I was still quite tender, but—to my great relief—I also had a newfound clarity about what I was meant to do following this year. I knew that upon my return to Perth I would apply for the seminary, and the thought of this brought me tremendous peace.

After the fact, I was surprised that I hadn't realised sooner the need to let go of the things I wasn't going to do, but then again, our culture doesn't tend to do decision-making very well. We prefer choice—keeping our options open—whereas to actually decide something by definition means ruling out a number of other things. And a lot of the time it's not a case of choosing between good and bad – often it's choosing between goods. So for instance, to marry one person means not marrying a bunch of other people, some of whom it could be quite nice being married to!

When we're young, anything seems possible. But eventually we all reach a point where we need to consciously let go of things we might have done, in favour of what God actually has in store for us. And if we don't do this, chances are we're setting ourselves up for the proverbial mid-life crisis – waking up one day and realising that we never did all those things we hadn't let go of.

Moving beyond my year away, the Goodbye song and note would become very helpful reminders for me as the challenges of seminary life and then priesthood made

themselves felt from time to time. The goodbyes I said that night were real, but the concrete implications of them would need to be experienced and accepted as life went on. But I could deal with these implications with relative peace, knowing that the Lord had guided me through the whole process – even if he had to essentially whack me on the side of the head with a note in order to get through to me!

So, this was but one instance among many of the Lord calling me, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, first back to my Catholic faith, and eventually to the priesthood. If you're here today, it's because—in various ways—the Lord has called you to follow him, and continues to call you.

As I noted at the beginning, the work and trials of our day-to-day lives can dim the clarity of our initial call at times, as I see all-too-often in myself. As such, it might be worth taking a few moments today to reflect on what first drew you to follow Christ, and to allow the memory of that initial encounter to rekindle the spark of enthusiastic discipleship in your life if it has become dampened over time.

For, as we heard Christ proclaim in the Gospel, the Kingdom of God is at hand – a kingdom which touches all aspects of our lives, and offers us the otherworldly glory and peace that, in our heart of hearts, we've always longed for.

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*“Goodbye” music video:* [https://youtu.be/L-sq324zEzc?si=0-6JINgEF7CDW\\_UF](https://youtu.be/L-sq324zEzc?si=0-6JINgEF7CDW_UF)