

+ Maria

September 9th – St. Peter Claver

My dear Sisters in Christ and Our Lady of Mt. Carmel – I think today's gospel and today feast day conspire together to give us a lot of food for thought. It seems to me that St. Luke organizes this passage by altitude, and each level seems worth our reflection.

As Carmelites, our ears are always pricked when we hear about biblical mountains: "Jesus departed to the mountain to pray and spent the night in prayer to God." Jesus went up the mountain and prayed, and he demonstrated for us the utter necessity of going off alone and silently to commune with God on whatever is our mountain. That night, how was his prayer? Maybe in peace, maybe with a thousand questions, maybe on fire. Maybe in the utter silence of divine love that Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity describes as characteristic of the inner silence and union among the persons of the Trinity. Before acting, Jesus prayed. His prayer led him to act.

Next, he comes half way down the mountain to meet his disciples. He chooses twelve of them and gives them a new title, and a new job description. These twelve will be the apostles – still disciples, but now sent – the meaning of the word apostle. Why those twelve? Why not better, or more intelligent or gifted men? Only He knows. They took the risk of following him, and he took the risk of choosing them. Jesus didn't seem to worry much about risk management.

Then he came down further with his disciples and his new apostles and stood on level ground, Luke tells us, and he worked, ministered, preached and healed. Great crowds and large numbers came both from Jewish Jerusalem and pagan Tyre & Sidon. He had power and the people wanted him to touch them for healing. He got right there in with them, close enough to rub shoulders and power came forth from him and he healed them all! All.

St. Ignatius Loyola has a very interesting meditation in the Spiritual Exercises. He presents the Trinity together in a meeting discussing the poor condition of the world. The sacred persons ask themselves: what can be done to save mankind? Look at the mess they have made. We already promised no more floods to wipe them out! Maybe somebody should go? And the Word, Jesus, he will go. It is impossible as St. Ignatius knows, for the Trinity to have a meeting, or for God to be presented as wondering what to do. St. Ignatius is not interested in the details, he's interested in the person on retreat considering and meditating on the reason for the incarnation. Christ became man to save all men and women. He took on flesh, lived, suffered and died, in order to redeem all people. He came down from the mountain, gathered believers and co-workers, and got down among people to heal and restore them.

Has Christ's mission changed today? People surely seem to need healing and love and to hear the truth. I don't think this has changed. But does Our Lord need a new method now? After all, these are new times. Maybe Jesus needs to become a cellphone since many people nowadays pay more attention to their cellphone than the person they are sitting next to or living with. I don't think Jesus will change his method either. As the Father sent the Son, so the Son sends his apostles and disciples. As weak and as imperfect as we are, Christ still sends the men and women he calls out to help save and to serve his people.

St. Peter Claver whose feast we are keeping today understood exactly where he fit on God's mountain and what he was expected to do. He lived an extraordinary pastoral life. He was born in Catalonia in 1581; entered the Jesuits in 1602; went to the missions in Cartagena, Colombia in 1610 and was ordained there in 1616. Cartagena was the center of the slave trade. About 100,000 slaves a year arrived there – many dead on arrival. St. Peter cared for them physically and spiritually and is credited with having baptized some 300,000 slaves. After they went to the plantations to work, he would follow them up and continue to care for them. Peter Claver put himself on level ground with these slaves, who were considered property, not persons. Their owners were Catholic, but their demeanor was not Christian. Peter was genuinely Christ-like when he professed that he would become a slave to the slaves. He wrote, "I must dedicate myself to the service of God until death, on the understanding that I am a slave." He was like an angel to the slaves, who thought that they were brought to the new world to be eaten. By becoming a slave to the slaves he could look them in the eye and truly touch them with Christ's healing touch.

Christ became man and lived among us in order to save us. St. Paul wanted to become all things to all men in order to save at least some. St. Peter Claver became a slave to save their souls for Christ. Mother Angeline wanted you to treat each elderly resident as if you were taking care of your own parents. She wanted you to care for the old people as if you were caring for Christ. She wanted you to care for the residents as Christ would have cared for the residents. This is the way Christ has laid down for us. We will be Christ like too if we spend time on the top of the mountain with the Lord, accept that we are disciples with our fellow disciples and apostles with the other apostles, and slaves and servants on level ground with God's people.

Father Mario Esposito, O.Carm.
Avila-On-Hudson
September 9, 2014