

There are in Sacred Scripture any number of passages that could be invoked as a job description for those who wish to be followers of Jesus. One that seems particularly appropriate is in the Gospel of Luke, 9: 2–3. In this passage, Jesus tells his

Following God's Agenda

Only in denying self can humans come to find their greatest identity.

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apostles three things: they are to proclaim the Good News of God's arriving kingdom, they are to be healers, and they are to be unencumbered. Perhaps by a priority of nature, unencumbered comes first, then healing (for words without action are not credible and convincing) and finally proclamation of the Word. People do need to hear the Good News. More importantly, however, they need to see and experience it in unencumbered, selfless acts of healing.

Later on in this same chapter of Luke's Gospel, verse 23, Jesus reminds us that we are our biggest encumbrance, not things we possess (modern day "stuffs" and "tunics"), but we ourselves, our attachment to our own agenda, our own

way of viewing the world and all that is in it. The daily chore of denying our very selves, the root encumbrance from which all others spring: that is the really difficult task. It is also the pre-condition that sets us free to be effective healers and heralds of God's kingdom. In

the words of Walter Kasper, "He is really free who is free from himself and his interests in order to be wholly disposable for God and others" (*Jesus the Christ*, p. 158).

In a culture that tends to be dangerously self-centered, that spends millions of dollars annually on things and practices that will help "me" to be a better "me," the idea of denying oneself, especially as an ongoing, lifelong endeavor, can be

frightening or just plain foolish.

There is a legitimate question here. What is to be left of me if I embark on this lifelong task of denying myself? What is it that I am really seeking to be, if indeed, there is to be any "I" left at all? For an approach to an answer, we need to look to Jesus.

Jesus was a first-century Jew, son of Mary and Joseph, with his own unique personality traits, growth experience and personal history. He spent most of his life with Mary and Joseph, doing the ordinary things that a loving, maturing son does. During his life, Jesus was praised, misunderstood or not understood at all, even by his closest friends. He grew tired and rested, he experi-

enced sorrow and he wept, he enjoyed table fellowship both with friends and with society's outcasts. He always found time for prayer both alone and with others. He was physically abused and finally put to death on the cross. Yes, and God raised him to new life.

In all of this, from the most ordinary chores in the home of Mary and Joseph to his most astounding miracle, Jesus was God among us and for us. The entire life of Jesus was suffused with God's presence, not to change or replace it, but to bring it all to perfection. If one can speak of Jesus as being possessed, then he was possessed by the need to make present God's emerging kingdom. Jesus' agenda was God's agenda, to proclaim in word and deed only what he had heard and seen with the Father. When Jesus shed his Precious Blood on the cross, he proclaimed not only the unconditional and irrevocable love of God for us, he also gave us an unmistakable sign of the depths of his dedication and commitment to being the presence of God among us and for us, regardless the cost.

We never fully understand who Jesus of Nazareth is. The terminology we use—nature, person, hypostatic union—simply gives us one mutually agreed upon way of speaking about the mystery. The mystery itself remains. It is in the depths of that mystery, however, that we get some idea of what our life is to be.

The image of an echoing chamber comes to mind. An echoing chamber is created for listening. Having first listened, it echoes back with its own individual overtones, depending on its unique surface and

structure, exactly what it has heard. It makes present again for all who would listen the word spoken in it. Should the echoing chamber experience a fit of independence, trying to add to or subtract from what it has heard, it would distort its very nature. It would also distort the message, indeed not really hear it.

We are to be, each in his or her own unique and individual way, echoing chambers giving God human presence in our world. Like Jesus, God's agenda, and absolutely nothing else, is to be our agenda. We are to echo in our daily lives what, in the "healing silence of recollection" (the phrase is Thomas Merton's) we have heard and seen with the Father, to give human presence in the world to the Father's love and compassion, his yearning for justice and peace.

The Precious Blood of Jesus is an abiding reminder and symbol not only of the

depths of God's love for each of us. It is also a clear sign and symbol of the depths of dedication and commitment that we must have to being the human expression of God's love in the world. In a continuous succession of individual historical moments we are to echo what we have heard and seen with the Father. Our encumbrances tarnish the appearance, distort the echo of God's love in the world, and slow the progress of his arriving kingdom.

Once we have put our hands to the plow, however, we do not turn back, trusting only in the truth that with God all things are possible. And in the end, perhaps, we discover that it has not been a journey of self denial at all, but rather a Spirit-guided and enabled affirmation of our truest self as we come forth moment to moment from the creating and redeeming hand of God.

Discussion Questions

1. Al O'Dell writes, "Like Jesus, God's agenda, and absolutely nothing else, is to be our agenda." How are we to discern God's agenda for us?
2. The entire life of Jesus was suffused with God's presence, and those who were around him felt it profoundly. How do people experience God's presence when they are near us?
3. How does the Precious Blood call us to be a living sign of God's presence in the world?