

Our first reading from Isaiah speaks of the great promise of salvation. "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. You have brought them abundant joy, and great rejoicing." We are living the great promise of God's light and joy in our lives. As we start a new year, we look for new ways to make this promise real in our lives. Pope Francis, during a homily in 2014, emphasized discernment in navigating our complex, daily lives. He said, "The Christian who abides in the Lord knows what is happening in his heart. Know how to discern the spirits, to discern whether it is truly to abide in the Lord or something else which distances you from the Lord." This process can be summed up in two words, "observe" and "serve."

Observing involves watching and noting, withholding judgement until all the data is available. Serving is putting our being into service. The scientific equivalent is "analysis and synthesis" or breaking complex phenomena into constituent parts and then combining them to understand the whole. Observing feeds our mind and serving directs our will. Observing fills our heads with understanding while serving fills our hearts with joy, much like the joy of giving a gift.

Today, Matthew's gospel describes the calling of the apostles. Here we see the "observe and serve" paradigm in action. Prior to this event, Andrew followed John the Baptist and observed his message of the coming Messiah. He even saw John famously point to Jesus and say, "Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." Andrew was anxious to observe Jesus and asked him, "Where are you staying?" Jesus said, "Come and you will see." What a great example for all of us, to want to know where we can find Jesus, to hear his words, and to build a deeper relationship with him. Two verses later, Andrew begins to serve the Lord after their encounter. We are told, "He first found his own brother Simon and told him, 'We have found the Messiah.'" Andrew shares the good news of what he observed, with his brother, who would later become our first pope.

This takes us to today's gospel where Jesus comes to the shore and finds Simon Peter and Andrew at work, fishing in the sea. He says, "Come after me and I will make you fishers of men. At once they left their nets and followed him." In John's gospel, Jesus also performs a miracle, and the two brothers catch enough fish to fill two boats. Simon Peter, however, says to Jesus, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." Peter, observing himself, sees his imperfections, yet he trusts in Jesus, and leaves everything behind to follow him.

This concept of observing and serving is part of a key that unlocks the great promise of salvation. GK Chesterton, in his book, "The Everlasting Man," describes a key, the same key given to Peter before the Ascension. The key is the Church, and it opens the door to our salvation. Chesterton says, "The whole Christian movement consisted in claiming to possess that key." However, the key, like the world, is complex and some people disregard Catholicism due to its complexity.

But in response, Chesterton says, "There was much undoubtedly about the key that seemed complex, indeed there is only one thing about it that was simple, it opened the door." It opened the door to the promised light in Isaiah's prophesy. We know it opened the door, by the rapid adoption of Christianity after the resurrection, and by the fact that so many people were willing to give their lives as martyrs, joyfully for the faith. Person after person opened the door of salvation, moving from darkness to God's great light, and experiencing His abundant joy. This includes our ancestors and others who've shared the faith with us.

So, how do we apply the "Observe and serve" concept in 2026? First, we need to observe God, others, and ourselves. We observe God as the source of all beauty, truth, and goodness. We can start by taking our eyes off our electronics and other distractions and observing the beauty of His creation. We can seek His truth by observing the scripture. And we can understand his goodness through the gift of his Son, whom we worship at today's mass.

Next, we need to observe others with a humble, open heart. We do this when we listen, listen, and listen to those we live with, work with, and share our community with. We also need to observe ourselves and realize we have strengths and weaknesses, just as Peter observed himself before accepting the call from Jesus. Saint Ignatius encourages an examination of conscience every night, recalling the presence of God that day and considering where we served him and what we could have done better.

Once we've observed God, others, and ourselves, we take the step of turning over our will to God, serving with our hearts in love, and seeking the joy that Isaiah talks about, the abundant joy that leads to great rejoicing. We serve God by following His commandments, Love the Lord your God with all your heart, your soul, and your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.

Putting ourselves in the service of God can be as simple as serving your spouse in a new way, observing their state of mind each day and offering to take some of their load. The same applies to children, being a help to your parents and observing what you can do to be a good example to your siblings. It can be as simple as praying daily for those in need, asking for their healing, comfort, and peace in this challenging world.

Maybe this is the year that you participate for the first time or increase your participation in one of the St James outreach ministries, by building a cottage, packing food for the poor, volunteering at the thrift store, supporting the medical and dental clinic, or volunteering at one of our Catholic schools. We would love to have your help during mass as an usher, a Eucharistic minister, or a lector. It's as simple as calling the office and talking to someone who can connect you with the right people. We pray that we at St. James be given the courage to be more like Andrew and Simon Peter, and to leave our nets behind, and follow Jesus.