

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time: February 7, 2010



Theme: Jesus calls us to our RISE “get out of the boat” and raise men.

Reading I: Isaiah 6: 1-2a, 3-8 Author: Isaiah Date: 700 BCE

Background: Isaiah describes his vision of YHWH in heaven with imagery derived from the earthly temple at Jerusalem, in which his experience takes place—the underlying conviction is that the Jerusalem temple is an external expression of the heavenly temple. The primary emphasis today, however, is not on the vision but on the call, which parallels the call of Peter in today’s gospel. The vision of God’s holiness, leads Isaiah to confess his sense of utter unworthiness. His call thus comes to him as a sheer miracle of grace. The prophet first receives forgiveness for his sin, is then called to “go for us,” and responds by accepting the call. Note the contrast between his initial diffidence in reaction to the vision and the confidence with which he finally accepts the call.

Theme: Here I am, send me.

Question: From where did the ember of forgiveness come, allowing him to answer “send me”?

Reading II: 1 Corinthians: 15: 3-8,11, Author: Paul Date: ~ 55 AD

Background: This is one of the most important New Testament passages. Paul deals with the Corinthians’ doubt about the resurrection of the dead. The older view was that the Corinthians held the Greek belief in the immortality of the soul as opposed to the Jewish-Christian belief in the resurrection of the body. More recently it has been supposed that as gnosticizers they believed that through the sacraments they were already raised and therefore did not require a further resurrection of the body. Since he mentions Cephas (Peter) and James by name, and since he met these two men at Jerusalem on his first post-conversion visit there about the year 35, a substantial part of these events must be very ancient, taking us back to ~five years of the events alluded to.

Theme: I work for God due to the grace he gave me.

Question: What work did you do for God last month? In the coming year?

Gospel: Luke 2: 1-11 Author – Luke, Date: ~ 80-85 AD

Background: This time the call of the first disciples is moved to a later point in the narrative. There was a miraculous draught of fishes, a story found in a post-resurrection setting in John 21. It is much disputed whether this was originally a post-resurrection story later retrojected into the earthly life of Jesus or vice versa, and the weight of the arguments on both sides is about equal. By combining this tradition with his Marcan source, Luke re-thinks the call of Simon Peter. The call does not come like a bolt out of the blue, as in Mark. Simon had already witnessed the healing of his mother-in-law, and now he experiences the miraculous haul of fish. This creates in him a feeling of unworthiness.

Theme: Jesus calls us to “get in” and then “get out of the boat” and call men.

Questions: o Peter says, “Depart from me Lord, for I am a sinful man” When are we unworthy?

- Is there a loss of transcendence in our world?
- Can the call for dependence be greater than our call for independence?

• *Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time: Feb. 7, 2010*

Reading I: [Is 6:1-2a, 3-8](#)

In the year King Uzziah died,
I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne,
with the train of his garment filling the temple.
Seraphim were stationed above.

They cried one to the other,
“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts!
All the earth is filled with his glory!”
At the sound of that cry, the frame of the door shook
and the house was filled with smoke.

Then I said, “Woe is me, I am doomed!
For I am a man of unclean lips,
living among a people of unclean lips;
yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”
Then one of the seraphim flew to me,
holding an ember that he had taken with tongs from the altar.

He touched my mouth with it, and said,
“See, now that this has touched your lips,
your wickedness is removed, your sin purged.”

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying,
“Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?”
“Here I am,” I said; “send me!”

Reading II: [1 Cor :15:3-8, 11](#)

I am reminding you, brothers and sisters,
of the gospel I preached to you,
which you indeed received and in which you also stand.
Through it you are also being saved,
if you hold fast to the word I preached to you,
unless you believed in vain.
For I handed on to you as of first importance what I also received:
that Christ died for our sins
in accordance with the Scriptures;
that he was buried;
that he was raised on the third day
in accordance with the Scriptures;
that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve.
After that, Christ appeared to more
than five hundred brothers at once,
most of whom are still living,
though some have fallen asleep.
After that he appeared to James,
then to all the apostles.
Last of all, as to one born abnormally,
he appeared to me.
For I am the least of the apostles,
not fit to be called an apostle,
because I persecuted the church of God.
But by the grace of God I am what I am,
and his grace to me has not been ineffective.
Indeed, I have toiled harder than all of them;
not I, however, but the grace of God that is with me.

Therefore, whether it be I or they,
so we preach and so you believed.

Gospel: [Lk 5:1-11](#)

While the crowd was pressing in on Jesus and listening to the word of God,
he was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret.
He saw two boats there alongside the lake;
the fishermen had disembarked and were washing their nets.
Getting into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon,
he asked him to put out a short distance from the shore.
Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat.
After he had finished speaking, he said to Simon,
“Put out into deep water and lower your nets for a catch.”
Simon said in reply,
“Master, we have worked hard all night and have caught nothing,
but at your command I will lower the nets.”
When they had done this, they caught a great number of fish
and their nets were tearing.
They signaled to their partners in the other boat
to come to help them.
They came and filled both boats
so that the boats were in danger of sinking.
When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at the knees of Jesus and said,
“Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.”
For astonishment at the catch of fish they had made seized him
and all those with him,
and likewise James and John, the sons of Zebedee,
who were partners of Simon.
Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid;
from now on you will be catching men.”
When they brought their boats to the shore,
they left everything and followed him.

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time: Feb. 7, 2010

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Transcendence: Put out into the deep

A hallmark of what some academics have called the “postmodern world” is the loss of transcendence. It is supposed that there is no other reality than the projections we humans construct, whether individually or communally. All of existence seems to have been a distorted mirror of our passion for power and pleasure. We do not need some pedant to lecture us on deconstructionism in order to feel its effects. Nor need we realize that the great prophecies of postmodernism are found in Nietzsche’s will to power, Marx’s money-Molech or Freud’s seething cauldron of the id. We see, hear, and smell the theory every day, in streets, courthouses, on radios and television. Power, money, and pleasure reign supreme as the values by which to measure our lives and happiness. In an unrestrained celebration of choice, the human will is worshiped as the ultimate reality. There is no standard of truth and goodness outside of us, before which our wills must bow. We make the truth. We concoct what is good. And “nobody has any right to tell me what to do.” The human will has no duty, no responsibility, no obedience to any authority other than itself.

We think we celebrate openness: but it is an openness only to the projections of our own lips and minds. Rarely are we open to the wholly other—some other that transcends the mirror images of our ego, class, ideology, nation, or any other pet particularity. Our openness is precisely not to transcendence. It is a hankering after our own constructions, those effigies we feel comfortable with, those icons that make us feel secure, those ego-clones that confirm our self-importance.

True transcendence is something else altogether. Isaiah knew he was in the presence of some reality higher and loftier than any human or earthly throne. “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. All the earth is filled with God’s glory.” Isaiah’s earthly house shook and billowed with smoke. He became immediately aware of his paltry and sinful condition. This encounter with high mystery, beyond him, shattered any delusion of grandeur he might have had. “Woe is me, I am doomed! For I am a person of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips.”

The quality of this transcendent experience is uncannily matched in Luke’s Gospel story of the great fish catch. After preaching to the disciples and the crowds, Jesus tells Simon to “put out into deep water and lower the nets.” Simon’s resistance is due to the fact that he and his fellows, for all of their own efforts fishing through the night, have caught nothing. Obviously, there is nothing out there. “But if you say so, I will lower the nets.”

Herein is the openness of Peter, despite the meager evidence of his experience, to a will other than his own. And this brought such a great, unexpected catch that even the apostles’ resources were at the breaking point. Their fishing nets nearly ripped apart. They caught more than their craft could hold. Their boats almost sank.

In the presence of this superb show of power beyond human reckoning, Peter adores the awesome mystery he has witnessed and is suddenly conscious of his sinfulness, like Isaiah. “Leave me, Lord; I am a sinful man.”

The moment we recognize our inadequacy, our sin, our smallness before the greatness of the transcendent God, we are capable of truly being called out of ourselves. When God is heard to say, “Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?” Isaiah responds, “Here I am. Send me.” He is empowered, not paralyzed.

Similarly, Christ’s manifestation of transcendent power was not for the sake of stirring human anxiety and fear. Christ wants to call us to a life mission far beyond the expectations of our constricted categories.

Human encounter with the transcendent God has always met with resistance. But the idea of a God wholly independent of our sway is especially repulsive to contemporary taste. After all, it requires a terrible admission of our insufficiency. It demands a recognition that we cannot rescue or save ourselves. It commands a yielding to, a humble listening for, an obeying of an other utterly beyond our mere human minds and wills.

The gospel Paul preached rests upon the recognition that we mere humans stand in need of salvation and that we are powerless to do this for ourselves. What is more, we are sinners who need to be healed of our moral wounds. This, we believe in faith, has been done in Jesus Christ, who died for our sins and promises us a world beyond our earth and our earthly projects. It is not by dint of human science, alchemy, or artifact that our meaning can be found. It is only by God’s kind favor that we are what we are and that we are made for something far greater still. If that last paragraph is not an insult to the postmodern mind, nothing

What would prompt you to abandon your job? higher pay? a better occupation? an improved location? a more congenial employer? all of the above? Jesus' invitation to some fishermen to leave their business and follow after him is best understood in the context of this question.

Luke notes that Peter (and of course his brother, Andrew) had a business partnership with another pair of brothers, James and John (Luke 5:10). They owned at least two boats (5:2).

A boat discovered in 1986 close to shore at the Sea of Galilee is 26.5 feet long, 7.5 feet wide, and 4.5 feet high, with a rounded stern and a fine bow. (Carbon tests thus far date this boat to the period 140 B.C. to A.D. 40).

Physical anthropologists estimate that the average Galilean male of the Roman-Byzantine period stood about 5 feet 5 inches tall and weighed an average of 140 pounds. Fifteen such men would weigh just over a ton and could easily fit into this boat.

Jesus stepped into Peter's boat (v. 3). Mark tells us one boat held at least five passengers: James and John, their father Zebedee, and hired men (1:20). There could have been many more.

Fish became a popular commodity in the Greek and Roman period, and it is reasonable to guess that this specific partnership flourished. What prompted them to "leave everything and follow Jesus" (v. 11)? His invitation alone?

The act of a man calling followers in Mediterranean culture is readily recognized by every native as a process of a patron gathering clients. In cultures like that where central government was perceived to be weak and ineffective, people banded together for mutual assistance.

For the most part, families stuck close together and helped each other out. But sometimes it became necessary to reach beyond the family and to form "family-like" bonds with others who could lend the help that family members couldn't.

One of these others is a "patron," that is, a person with surplus means who distributes that surplus by purely personal whim and choice.

By providing seasoned and experienced fishermen with a bountiful catch after a frustrating night of work, Jesus presents himself very obviously as a patron.

A patron is someone who can get for you something you could not obtain by your own abilities, or on better terms than you could arrange for yourself. Jesus gets the better of these fisher folk at their own game!

In Luke's story Simon, James, and John clearly perceive Jesus in this role. By falling at the knees of Jesus, Simon Peter uses a specific gesture that recognizes him as superior, as a patron.

In mainstream U.S. culture, we take great pride in standing on our own two feet and in not having to rely on anyone else. We applaud those who pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. Our Mediterranean ancestors in the Faith would consider this insane, an invitation to death and extinction.

Following Jesus as a client in the Mediterranean world or a disciple in the modern world involves a willingness to be dependent. One gives up apparent security for a perceived greater security.

Are Americans up to it? The Galilean fishermen were.

They left everything and followed him.

While he was on the mountain with Christ the Lord in company with the disciples James and John, the blessed apostle Peter heard a voice from heaven saying: *This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Listen to him.*

The apostle remembered this and made it known in his letter. *We heard a voice coming from heaven, he said, when we were with him on the holy mountain; and he added: so we have confirmation of what was prophesied. A voice came from heaven, and prophecy was confirmed.*

How great was Christ's courtesy! This Peter who spoke these words was once a fisherman, and in our day a public speaker deserves high praise if he is able to converse with a fisherman!

Addressing the first Christians the apostle Paul says: *Brothers and sisters, remember what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise according to human standards; not many of you were influential or of noble birth.*

But God chose what the world regards as weak in order to disconcert the strong; God chose what the world regards as foolish in order to abash the wise; God chose what the world regards as common and contemptible, of no account whatever, in order to overthrow the existing order.

If Christ had first chosen a man skilled in public speaking, such a man might well have said: "I have been chosen on account of my eloquence." If he had chosen a senator, the senator might have said: "I have been chosen because of my rank." If his first choice had been an emperor, the emperor surely might have said: "I have been chosen for the sake of the power I have at my disposal."

Let these worthies keep quiet and defer to others; let them hold their peace for a while. I am not saying they should be passed over or despised; I am simply asking all those who can find any grounds for pride in what they are to give way to others just a little.

Christ says: Give me this fisherman, this man without education or experience, this man to whom no senator would deign to speak, not even if he were buying fish. Yes, give me him; once I have taken possession of him, it will be obvious that it is I who am at work in him. Although I mean to include senators, orators, and emperors among my recruits, even when I have won over the senator I shall still be surer of the fisherman.

The senator can always take pride in what he is; so can the orator and the emperor, but the fisherman can glory in nothing except Christ alone.

Any of these other men may come and take lessons from me in the importance of humility for salvation, but let the fisherman come first. He is the best person to win over an emperor.

Remember this fisherman, then, this holy, just, good, Christ-filled fisherman. In his nets cast throughout the world he has the task of catching this nation as well as all the others. So remember that claim of his: *We have confirmation of what was prophesied*

(Sermon 43, 5-7: CCL 41, 510-511)

Augustine (354-430) was born at Thagaste in Africa and received a Christian education, although he was not baptized until 387. In 391 he was ordained priest and in 395 he became coadjutor bishop to Valerius of Hippo, whom he succeeded in 396. Augustine's theology was formulated in the course of his struggle with three heresies: Manicheism, Donatism, and Pelagianism. His writings are voluminous and his influence on subsequent theology immense. He molded the thought of the Middle Ages down to the thirteenth century. Yet he was above all a pastor and a great spiritual writer.

REFLECTION

We might give to this Sunday's Eucharistic celebration the name, Excuse Me Sunday. We will hear from the opening verses of the prophesies of the man called in our First Reading, Isaiah. There seems to be some kind of liturgy going on. The prophet is in the very "holy of Holies" and something special happens. He has a vision of the throne of God and claims to see the Lord. Amid the holy smoke and terrifying chanting of the attendants at the throne, Isaiah declares his unworthiness and unclean state to have seen the Holy One. He makes the assumption that he is going to be condemned.

The opposite happens. The fire-carrying spirits descend with a burning coal and touch his unclean lips. He hears their words that his lips are clean and then hears the Lord ask whether or not there is anybody whom the Lord can send. This seems a simple announcement and so Isaiah responds he is available, but for what he does not inquire.

The verses which follow this encounter and response reveal something more terrifying which ends the vision. We do not hear these lines today, but I will tell you the rest of the story anyway. Isaiah has confessed that he lives among people who, like him, has 'unclean' lips. He is to be missioned to make devastating pronouncements to Israel. "Make the ears of this people fat, its ears dull; shut its eyes, so that it will not see with its eyes, hear with its ears, understand with its heart, and be converted and healed."

Isaiah is going to have to say hard things to Israel "until the towns have been laid waste and deserted, houses left untended, countrysides made desolate, and the Lord drives the people out." Isaiah, after hearing this, would feel even more the 'woe is me' from his first response to seeing the Lord as King.

Peter, too, has a very good excuse in today's Gospel. He had been fishing with his friends and had caught nothing. Jesus is presented as knowing where the fish are to be had and so Peter takes the bait and becomes hooked. After being assured that the netful of fish were ashore, Peter kneels down and states his truth that he is a sinful man in the presence of obviously, a holy man. Jesus, it is important to note, does not deny Peter's truth. In a manner to which Peter will become accustomed, Jesus invites Peter to follow Him and Peter will find out even more clearly, just how sinful he is and how compassionate Jesus will be revealed.

It does seem that our human excuses do not work, especially those of being unworthy, unclear, un-callable. Other prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures and others from the Christian Scriptures have had similar negative or puzzling responses to God's call and intimacy. Our Blessed Mother had a real good one when invited to be the mother of Jesus; she was not married. Perhaps, as with Isaiah, intimacy brings out our best and our worst. In relationship with God, our worst brings out God's merciful best.

There are glaring hard lights and glowing soft lights. A candle is such a soft, warm display. The closer one gets to the light, certain things will be revealed which remain hidden when at a distance. The Christian challenge is whether or not the light of Christ is harsh or gentle. To be honest, it is usually defined by how one looks at her/himself. If we have high expectations of our responses to God, we will most likely believe that God has equally high or higher expectations of ourselves. If so, then the candle becomes a spotlight.

Peter expects his excuse will allow him to return to his fish-finding. Perhaps he projected on to Jesus what he felt about himself, especially after having caught nothing all night. In the light of such holy goodness, Peter found himself worse off than he had thought. The Light projects Himself into and around Peter and his self-image. Peter leaves everything to follow Jesus, except his truth which he will experience even more accurately, but in time, more gently.

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