

5th Sunday of Ordinary Time “Surprised by Grace”

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Our first reading from Isaiah is profound. The reading, however, can also be received as somewhat humorous. God calls Isaiah to conversion and gives him the greatest honor in the whole world, to be a prophet of God the Most High. Isaiah’s response? “I am doomed! Woe is me!” He says, “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!”

St. Paul recalls his conversion in our second reading. This conversion was so radical that he went from persecuting Christians to zealously recruiting new disciples. St. Paul tells the Corinthians, “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.”

In our Gospel reading, Jesus steps onto Peter’s boat and invites him to put out into deep water and lower his net for a catch. Peter shrugs his shoulders, thinking that this was a bit silly. There is no fish out there. In deference to this rabbi however, he did what he was asked and set out into deep water. The number of fish that was caught was so outrageous that it was obvious to everyone that they just witnessed a miracle. Jesus, however, never performs a miracle without a specific reason and purpose. This is why, once they were on shore, Simon Peter knew what was happening and so he falls onto his knees and says, “Depart from me Lord, for I am a sinful man.” Without blinking, Jesus responds, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men”.

This Sunday we have three great readings that celebrate three great people who share some things in common. What unites Isaiah, Paul and Simon Peter? For one, they were all surprised by grace. They didn’t think in their wildest dreams that God would call them to their vocations. Secondly, after God’s invitation, they were immediately aware of their sinfulness and inadequacies. Thirdly, and most importantly, through conversion, faith and courage, Isaiah, Paul and Simon Peter said “yes”. They said yes. They courageously accepted the invitation to their new vocations. Even though they felt unworthy and inadequate, they trusted that God would provide the grace.

As an aside, this calls to mind my own vocational journey. I remember when I began to seriously consider a vocation to the priesthood, how difficult a process it was for me at the start. I felt the voice of God calling me, to be sure. I felt this calling in my heart. I also had the feelings of “unworthiness”, and they were justified feelings of unworthiness, from my point of view anyway, and probably also justified from the point of view of some who knew me back then. Nazareth has a way of keeping you humble.

As I reflected on that, I began to wonder what Isaiah might have been like as a young man or a teenager to make him feel so unworthy? God saw so much more in him than he could in himself. I also wondered what led Paul to become such a brutal persecutor of Christians as a young man. Paul was an intense individual and a man to be

feared. Why then, does the Risen Lord pick Paul of all people to be his apostle to the Gentiles? The Lord picked him because he saw something no one else could see. I also wonder what life was like for Simon Peter before Jesus arrived and turned his life upside down. I wonder what his cookouts were like, what the fish smelt like as it cooked slowly over the fire, and how funny and perhaps even irreverent some of Simon Peter's jokes were. And then Jesus comes along and everything changes. Jesus saw so much more in Peter than Peter could see in himself; so much so that this encounter with Jesus moved Peter to leave everything behind to follow him. What a decision. What courage. Perhaps, some of the people also thought, what folly! Simon Peter follows his heart by following Jesus, all the while not feeling very worthy of being a disciple. He simply trusts.

As we have seen, the prophet Isaiah, St. Paul, and St. Peter shared the same feelings of unworthiness. They are not print on a page. These were real people. Like them, we have all felt unworthy of God's love too at times. However, God always sees something more in us than we can in ourselves. With that in mind, what is the moral of our readings this Sunday? Here is what I think. In our times of guilt, in our times of shame, in our times of humiliation, Jesus Christ knocks on our doors. When Jesus knocks on our doors, we may feel unworthy, inadequate, and we may even think that we are a lost cause, at home, at work, at school, in our vocation like marriage or in my case Holy Orders. When were the times you simply felt unworthy of God's love? When were those times? I bet there are people here who feel that way today. My friends, in the times we feel most unworthy, Jesus calls us to sail into deep water, a dangerous place and at times a frightening place. It is when we take the risk of trusting the Lord in all things can we begin to see in ourselves what God sees. In that light, what does that image of sailing into deep water mean for you in your life right now? What does it look like? You see, it is when we have that faith, when we have that courage, and we have that trust Jesus calls us to, amazing things can happen. We can be surprised by grace.