

5<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – C (February 7, 2010)  
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In Ordinary Time it doesn't often happen that all three Scripture readings are related to each other. The Old Testament reading is chosen to correspond with a theme from the gospel reading. The second reading, on the other hand, is generally from one of St. Paul's letters and is about something entirely unrelated to the other readings. Today, however, there is indeed a common thread that knits together all three readings: God's direct encounter with man despite the latter's unworthiness, and the call to holiness and discipleship that is nevertheless extended to him.

Consider the three main human actors here: Isaiah, St. Paul, and St. Peter; first of all, the prophet Isaiah. He writes of the vision he once had—he saw God seated on his throne of majesty in heaven. To say he was awestruck is to put it far too mildly. In fact, Isaiah was very much afraid; from at least the time of Moses had come the belief that no one could see God and live. No wonder that the prophet, a man of 'unclean lips' (that is, he knew himself to be a sinner), would lament "woe is me—I am doomed!" And yet, Isaiah (after being cleansed of his sin) answered God's call for someone to send out in his name: "Here am I—send me!"

Regarding St. Paul, we are certainly familiar with his story, one that he himself summarizes for the Corinthians in our second reading. As Paul reminds them of Jesus' rising from the dead, he also reminds them about his own dramatic conversion—when Jesus called him from a life of persecuting the earliest Christians to the life of an apostle and disciple of Christ. Paul confesses that he was "not fit to be called an apostle" and indeed he did not deserve that honor. But God's grace makes possible what seems humanly impossible, and we know that Paul went on to become that great apostle to the Gentiles and the most important preacher of the gospel the world has ever known.

Finally, the gospel presents us with Peter, the fisherman—he who had heard of Jesus but did not know much about him. The fishing had not gone well that day, and so Jesus' suggestion to go out into deeper water and lower the nets didn't sound too smart. You can almost hear Peter muttering under his breath: "you've got to be kidding—we've been out all night and got zilch!" But Peter went along with it, just for the heck of it, maybe to humor Jesus...and we know what happened. When he saw the miracle, the huge catch of fish, Peter was struck with the awareness that he was in the immediate presence and power of God. And like Isaiah in the first reading, Peter experienced that divine presence and was immediately reminded of his own contrasting smallness and wretchedness: "depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." Even so, however, Jesus said to him: "no fear—from now on I'll help you to lead others to me."

Pretty amazing, isn't it? We may think that Isaiah, Paul, Peter and all the other towering figures from Scripture must have reached the heights of spiritual and moral perfection in order to be specifically chosen by God and to accomplish all they did. But that is simply not the case—they were all just as human, petty, fearful and prone to sin and selfishness as any of the rest of us. Does that scandalize you? It shouldn't. In fact, this is the story we share with all the saints with the one unique exception of the sinless Virgin Mary. Take the apostles, for example—Peter and the other eleven. They were not exactly the cream of the first-century crop, to say the least. The gospels are filled with examples of their bickering, their slowness of understanding, their smallness of mind and their jockeying for positions of prestige and importance. And Jesus often had to reprimand them, sometimes even expressing rather openly his exasperation with them. But Jesus called them and never gave up on them. He gave them the grace and strength and the gifts of the Holy Spirit they needed to do the work he gave them. And the apostles persevered—they hung in there despite their sins and frailties and indeed became the great saints and heroes and foundation stones of the Church that Jesus intended them to be.

The same holds true for the other saints throughout Christian history. We can tend to put them up on such a high pedestal, so far away from us, that we convince ourselves that we can't possibly follow their example...and so we excuse ourselves from any effort to pursue holiness. And yet, the saints' struggles and stories are our struggles and stories. Consider the example of St. Jerome—a brilliant Bible scholar of the fourth century who produced a Latin translation of the Bible (the Vulgate) that the Church used for centuries. But at times he had a very short fuse and could lash out in anger against those with whom he disagreed in a way that was hardly Christ-like. Has anyone here ever struggled with impatience or anger? (I won't ask for a show of hands...) Know that we have a fellow struggler in St. Jerome. Then there is St. Teresa of Avila, a great 16<sup>th</sup>-century reformer of the Carmelite religious order. God granted her great spiritual and mystical gifts, but she also battled her human frailties and didn't always respond to life's challenges with perfect patience. Once she was having an especially bad day and was complaining about it to God. The story goes that God told her that that is what he sometimes allows his friends to endure...to which Teresa responded (with perhaps a bit of chutzpah): "well, no wonder you have so few friends!"

The point is: none of us is perfect. Not the great Old Testament prophets, not the apostles nor any of the saints, and not a single one of us. But God calls every single one of us to be his sons and daughters, he calls us to holiness, and he calls us to do some specific work. Are we worthy of being called by Christ; can we claim to deserve or merit by our own efforts his love and mercy and companionship? Of course not! Again, that is one of the main points of all three of these readings today: Isaiah, Paul and Peter all realized full well the reality of their own sins; Peter's response is perhaps the most heartfelt and the most poignant: "depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." That wasn't false humility on his part; Peter was simply being honest with himself and with Jesus. We may likewise think that we can't possibly do what we think the Lord may want from us. Sometimes, for example, I hear about a young man who is asked if he has ever thought about being a priest...and he says something like, "oh, no—I'm not worthy to be a priest." Worthy?? No one is worthy on his own: Pope Benedict is not, Archbishop Hanus is not, and I assure you most wholeheartedly that I am not. In fact, I am reminded on a regular basis of that fact!

But 'worthiness' or some state of moral spiritual perfection is not the point, at least regarding the reality and challenge of God's call. God called the prophets to speak in his name despite their sinfulness and unworthiness. Jesus called the apostles to proclaim the gospel, the Holy Spirit called the saints to their particular vocations in order to further the kingdom of God in this world and to prepare us all for eternity with him. And God calls every single one of us to himself, to growth in holiness, and to further his work in the Church and the world. He calls us, warts and all; he doesn't wait until we reach some stage of perfection. In fact, God calls us precisely in the midst of our sinfulness and our struggles—so that his grace can accomplish that work through us. It's just like St. Paul said in that second reading: "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me has not been ineffective." That's the ticket: the most amazing and powerful grace of God.

It really is amazing that God wants to work through such weak creatures like us, just like he has throughout history—and yet that is just what happens. Of course we must strive to grow in holiness and virtue; we can't be lazy and complacent and stay stuck in sin; we will be hearing a lot more about that challenge in Lent that begins a mere (eleven)/ten days from now. But God is always calling us ever closer to himself and to persevere in the work he gives us—no matter how great or small it may seem in the eyes of the world. That divine call is based on his love for us and his desire to help us by his grace to do what he calls us to do. May we echo the words and the spirit of Isaiah who, on hearing the Lord's question "Whom shall I send?", responded simply with "Here I am..send me!"