

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time: The Call to Holiness

In today's first reading from Isaiah chapter 6, we heard about the call of the prophet. The scene was grand. God was seated high on a lofty throne. His garment filled the Temple. There were angels there singing, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts! All the earth is filled with his glory!" Isaiah experienced the holiness of God. Perhaps we can best understand this as God's separation from all that is not filled with His Presence. The door shook, the Temple was filled with smoke, incense, and Isaiah became very much aware of his sinfulness. "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!" Isaiah was convinced that he was doomed. How could he, a sinful man, be in the presence of holiness. Certainly he would be punished for his sins. Instead, an angel takes an ember from the fire of incense and touches Isaiah's lips. His sins have been purged, he has been made holy, separate for the Lord, fit for the mission the Lord has set aside for him.

In a similar way, Peter, James and John had an experience of the holiness of the Lord. How else could we explain their decisions to leave their boats full of fish and follow Jesus? It had to be more than the miraculous catch of fish. If this were about the fish, they would have stayed with their boats and brought the fish to market. It also had to be more than the teaching of the Lord from their boats. These were wonderful words, but they also experienced so much more, so much that they changed their lives. What they had experienced was the magnetism of the Lord, the holiness of the Christ. At the same time, Peter and most probably the others, had the horrible recollection of their own sinfulness. "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." But Jesus had a mission for Peter. His sins would be forgiven. The Lord's holiness was infinitely more powerful than Peter's sins.

So, also, we have an experience of the Lord. We are drawn in by the Lord's holiness. "Holy, holy, holy," we say at the beginning of the Eucharistic Prayer, the Prayer where Jesus will be present on our altar. At the same time, we recognize our own sinfulness. At the beginning of the Mass we say that we are sinful people who do not deserve to be in the presence of the Holy One. But like Isaiah and like Peter, the Lord heals us from our sins because he also has a mission for us. We are to bring His Presence to the world. Therefore we also must be holy.

When we think about a person who is holy we are inclined to call up an image of an imaginary, plastic saint. Unrealistic depictions of saints destroy the credibility of the one whose holiness is recognized by the church. The saints were real people, with tempers that had to be controlled and vices that had to be conquered. For example, St. Matthew was a tax collector and as such a thief. St. Jerome was known to have had a very bad tempter. And St. Augustine. He tried it all. He had a child out of wedlock. He had numerous other pseudo relationships. He was an arrogant philosopher until he was attracted by the simple words of St. Ambrose of Milan.

The saints could all tell the Lord to leave them because they were sinful. But God

needed them for His Mission. God also needs us for His Mission. That means that we have to fight against any negative inclinations in our lives and fight for the Kingdom. That means that we often have to leave the comfort of the fish we have just caught behind us and follow the Lord. Fish we have caught, what fish? The material goods of our lives are fish we have worked hard for and finally reeled in. We need to recognize that the meaning of life is far more than the amount of fish in our boats, or our homes. The meaning of life comes from our responding to the holiness of Christ. Our lives have meaning when we ourselves become holy.

If you and I can have the courage to make God the focus of our lives, then we can accept and complete the mission he has set aside for each of us.

We must view every action of our lives as participating in and flowing from the holiness of the Lord. That action might be significant like the decision to raise another child for the Lord, or it may appear to be minor, like helping the elderly man down the block by cutting his grass. It may be significant like the decision to commit to weekly volunteer work for the poor, or it may appear to be minor like committing to the Catholic Ministry Appeal. All our decisions are major initiatives for the Kingdom of God when they flow from His holiness.

Most of the time saints and even the Lord are pictured as having haloes. This depiction has lost its meaning for modern people. The meaning of the halo is the representation of the holiness that flows from deep within a person. A halo isn't a circular piece of metal. A halo is a union with God that overflows from the life of a person committed to the Lord. A halo is a glow, a radiance of the Divine Life within someone. Those of us who experienced Pope St. John Paul II remember a man who radiated holiness, a man with a halo.

We are called to have a halo. We are called not just to witness the holiness of God, but to be purified by his holiness so that we ourselves might be holy. We are called to holiness like Isaiah and Peter and the rest because the Lord has a mission for each of us.

What is this mission? It is the mission to give the world the unique reflection of God that only each of us can provide. It is the mission to be our best selves.

May we have the courage to listen, to experience, to leave our boatload of fish and to follow the Lord.