

Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> February, 2019  
The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany - Year C

Isaiah 6:1-8  
Psalm 138  
1 Corinthians 15:1-11  
Luke 5:1-11

**In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...**

I have a bit of a confession to make today - I love Monty Python. Perhaps one of their more extreme films, which certainly pushes the boundaries of common decency more than some of their other classics, is "The Meaning of Life". In reading today's Gospel, in particular, I am reminded of a prayer said by Headmaster Humphrey Williams (played by John Cleese) in that film, "Let us praise God. O Lord...You are so big...so absolutely huge...we're all really impressed down here, I can tell you...forgive us O Lord, for this, our dreadful toadying, and our barefaced flattery, but You're so strong and, well, just so super fantastic! Amen."

It seems to me that we are often in a very unhealthy mindset when we come to church - we come feeling that we are just not good enough; not good enough to receive God's grace and forgiveness, so overwhelmed with our sinfulness that we are in no fit state to receive it!

Perhaps a deeper look at today's readings might help us in our thinking, because if there is one thing I am sure about it is this - God's interest is not in guilt... but in transformation. God's interest is not in guilt... but in transformation...

Central to today's gospel is Simon Peter. Luke has carefully prepared us for this encounter with Jesus in the fishing boat. Simon has already heard of Jesus' growing reputation in Capernaum. Indeed he's had Jesus visit for a meal and seen a demonstration of the rabbi's power in the miraculous healing of his mother-in-law.

So when Jesus comes up with this outrageous suggestion of trying for a catch again, at the wrong time of the day with the wrong net, he's willing to play along and see.

But nothing has prepared him for the astounding catch of fish that follows. This takes the fisherman into waters far deeper than he's ever experienced and he knows that he is floundering in the mystery of God. Awe-struck he collapses to his knees before Jesus.

Now note carefully what Peter says... where his mind and heart immediately go... "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man"... or in paraphrase, 'Don't come near me, Lord. Leave me alone. I'm a godless sort of person, and you shouldn't be associating with people like me.' At the point of encounter with God, his first response is a profound recognition of personal unworthiness.

It's so similar to what we hear from Isaiah and Paul in the other scriptures set for today. (both in paraphrase.) When Isaiah sees the glory of the Lord in the Temple he says, 'I can't open my mouth without exposing myself as a sinner...Here I am naked before the all consuming holiness of the Lord.' (Isaiah 6.5) Again similarly with Paul, shaking his head as he remembers Jesus appearing to him on the road to Damascus... 'I didn't deserve the honour... after all I spent my early years trying to wipe the church out of existence.' (1 Corinthians 15.9) At the point of encounter with God, the first response is a profound recognition of personal unworthiness.

But now note God's response. In every case he moves quickly to the call to personal transformation and a new life of ministry. Simon Peter is called to be the lead disciple and into a lifetime of evangelism. Isaiah's sins are wiped away in an instant and he responds immediately to God's call of service - "Here I am; send me!" While Paul says, 'But God is extremely generous and has made me what I am...' that is, the hardest worker of any of the apostles.

Life has many turning points, but for many people, its final act is played out something like this - with the person, deep in depression, and thinking along the lines of:" 'What are you doing here God? You know what sort of a man / woman I am.'

And a somewhat bemused, somewhat impatient voice returns. 'Yes indeed I do. I've known this all your life. Now we've got that established, do you think we could move on, as there's a whole lot that I want to show you.'

God does not dwell on the sinfulness, but instead God's focus is immediately on new life, new relationship and the call to vocation and ministry.

It's an amazingly common experience as a priest to hear people go to this place of 'I'm not good enough' even at the merest mention of God. I'm sure you have also heard non-churchgoers say 'The whole building would fall down if I ever went to church'. Or you ask a parishioner to take a role in the sanctuary and they say, 'Oh no... I'm not good enough to do that.'

Yes all of this is true... In truth none of us is good enough to stand in the presence of God. All of us are tarnished... no one of us has a mortgage on failure and sinfulness... And it is good for us to know and recognise this... but now what? It's crucial that we don't get stuck there. And it's crucial that we realise that God doesn't get stuck there.

The Protestant tradition teaches that people will never 'give their life to Jesus' until they are convicted, that is aware, of their sin. Now this has its foundation in truth. Honesty... rigorous self-honesty... is a precursor for all transformation. It is essential to a new beginning. We know this in all relationships, marriage being the obvious and dramatic example. And it's true of communities, even nations, as well as individuals.

But unfortunately some groups have distorted this theology and drift into conveying a god who is obsessed with sin... a god who is fixated on judgement and punishment. Whereas the God of Jesus Christ is a God obsessed with grace... with forgiveness and with transformation. The very human cry, 'I'm not good enough', is the beginning of the story in God's eyes, not the end. Indeed such honest recognition can set the ball in motion. The really exciting stuff is now on its way.

This is why in the renewal of Eucharistic liturgy in the mid-20th century the Confession was returned to its traditional place at the beginning of worship, immediately after the Gathering greeting and prayer. We present ourselves honestly before God, repentant for our failure to live up to the mark... but then we move on... eager to hear what God has in store for us next. Our liturgical emphasis is quite properly on forgiveness, grace and transformation, not on guilt.

And it is also why the Anglican Church continues to offer the opportunity for sacramental confession which we normally call Reconciliation. There are times in life when we recognise that we have become thoroughly stuck, because we cannot let go of the horrible reality of something bad that we did, or something that we failed to do. There are times when we need this 'dramatic' experience, of sitting with a trusted priest who represents both God and the community... and literally getting it all off our chest... and then hearing the audible pronouncement of God's forgiveness. All of this in order that we can move on, and let grace work in our lives... so we can be the good and holy people that God calls us to be.

Simon Peter's story is a great model for us... because we know from Scripture that he never ever gets it 100% right... he never reaches perfection. He continually needs forgiveness and another new beginning.

So it is with me. Recognition of failure and repentance is part of my daily prayer... simply because it is a continuing everyday reality of my life. So it is with all of us. But hear Jesus' words to Peter... his immediate response... for these words are being directed at us. "Get up... do not be afraid... from now on this is going to be very different... and believe me... I have exciting plans for you."

The God of Jesus, our God, is not obsessed with guilt or punishment. God's commitment is to grace and transformation.

In the name of God, Amen.