

## The Fourth Sunday before Lent (Proper 1/5 OT) 2019

Many of you will know that I have a liking for films, many of them with preposterous plots. Disaster movies, comedies, dramas – I love them all, and just can't help it – yes, it's yet another flaw in my character! In the film 'Sister Act,' the wonderful Whoopie Goldberg plays a gangster's moll from Reno, Nevada, who is sent to a convent after she becomes witness to a murder. There, she very reluctantly assumes the habit and gradually (in a very funny, if soapy way) both she and the nuns (including the severe Mother Superior, played by a redoubtable Maggie Smith) are transformed. One of the first questions she is asked by the nuns is about receiving the call. Puzzled to begin with, she then cottons on and tells them it was in Reno: 'and you don't know how difficult to receive the call is until you've lived in Reno!'

I have been wrestling with the word, 'vocation' over the past week, mainly because many will know that the diocese has designated 2019 as 'The Year of Vocation.' I think that my problem was that it is a word which has quite a lot of baggage associated with it. When one thinks of vocation, inevitably it tends to be tied up an understanding of it as a call to ministry of some sort, pointing towards diaconal and priestly roles or perhaps the consecrated lives of nuns and monks. We do also how the sense of vocational training and vocation within the caring professions, but we have over a millennium-long history of a rather limited religious understanding, and I think that this is something which needs to be broken down. That is not to say that the sense of call within a person's life towards such ministry is not necessary or desirable – far from it. However, the diocesan Year of Vocation seeks to focus on the call of **all** Christians to live as signs of the Kingdom Life which Jesus ushers in.

Our readings today put the sense of call firmly to the forefront of human experience, yet all are completely different in nature. In exploring them, I think that they offer us much to ponder regarding our own journey of faith.

The stupendous view which Isaiah gives us of his call to prophetic ministry draws us into an understanding of God as the divine one unparalleled in majesty and mystery. Isaiah's vision captures the drama of Temple worship, which was so central in his view of God that it was impossible for him to divorce it from the way he felt God was working within his life. The six-winged seraphs crying 'Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh' – 'Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord,' as the earth shakes, and the house is filled with smoke. Isaiah's response to the overwhelming presence of God is one of the realisation of his unworthiness to the divine call within his life, and yet he finds himself charged with prophesying using the fire of God on his tongue represented as a seraph touches his tongue with a coal of fire from the altar. Wow! Isaiah's life will never be the same again.

However, in the way that it is very easy to pigeon-hole people, we can also do the same with our own experience of God. Isaiah's vision ties God into his own understanding of his time and place. The vividness draws us through the clouds of incense in the liturgy of the Temple. God is made known in mystery beyond compare, and yet, in many ways we could allow this vision to limit God to majesty and awe, experienced in liturgical rites or earthshattering and terrifying experiences. This is a little like our trying to lock holiness up

in church, saying that you will only experience contact with God when you appear on a Sunday when the necessary rites are carried out. Whilst I do absolutely believe in the richness of grace we receive when we do what Jesus told us to do, gathering around the altar to meet him in bread and wine, we must never limit our faith and experience of God to a weekly service and thus allow ourselves to divide sacred from secular.

In our Gospel account God is experienced not in a place of holiness but the workplace of everyday life on the Sea of Galilee. It takes us five whole chapters of Luke before we reach the point that the first Apostles are called. Until this point Jesus has worked alone. Imagine the bustle of people on the shoreline. The smell of fishing nets, boats *and* people. The crowd wanting to hear Jesus so great that he chooses Simon's boat to speak from. By the time Luke wrote his Gospel, a boat had become the symbol for the Church, and we can perhaps see this account as laying down the foundations of the community of believers who will be charged with carrying the message of the Kingdom to the ends of the earth.

Fishing itself now comes to the fore. We are in everyday life. Simon and his friends have had a very poor night fishing. Then comes the surprising call by Jesus for these experienced fishermen to let their nets down into deep water – something they do despite Peter's scepticism. The miraculous draft of fishes occurs and the boats almost overwhelmed to the point of sinking. Peter experiences God breaking into everyday and is thus led on a journey. He falls to his knees in the realisation of his unworthiness of allowing the Divine Love to work within and through him, as do his companions, James and John. Jesus disregards this and reassures him with the words, 'Do not be afraid,' and the explanation that Peter's job from now will be catching people – live! The Greek word Luke uses for this is an unusual form of the word *zoe*, meaning life, and unlike that associated with fishing which ends up with a dead catch in a frying pan, it resonates with life. Peter, and those with him will draw people to the abundance of life found in Jesus Christ, 'The Way, the Truth and the Life.'

In both Isaiah and Peter, unworthiness is never an excuse to be safe in the familiarity of habit or old ways. They are both sent out into the world, and both ultimately take risks for the Kingdom of God. Isaiah's call to justice and Peter's to the Good News of Jesus Christ are powerful examples of people who, despite flaws (many in the case of Peter) transform many other people's lives.

So what about us? For some, there may well be a decided moment when we know the call of God within our lives. I know that I certainly did, and like, Peter, felt myself unworthy. I just had to put my faith in God, and say, 'Lord, your will, not mine.' It still feels pretty scary sometimes, but I believe that God is with me, no matter what.

But this sense of vocation need not necessarily ever involve a moment of drama like Isaiah's vision. It can be experienced in the everyday breaking of God into our lives made known in the way we approach others. We might pick up a phone or visit someone. We might just be a shoulder to cry on, or a person others know that they can rejoice with. Vocation - allowing God to lead you on a journey towards who he calls you to be - involves one sole element, and it is at the heart of what Jesus displays for all of us.

The chief Christian vocation is to LOVE.



The Miraculous Draft of Fishes – Thomas Saunders Nash 1891-1968

### **Isaiah 6:1-8**

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.”

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

### **I Corinthians 15: 1-11**

Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain.

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to

more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit 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 toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

### **Luke 5: 1-11**

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” Simon answered, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.” When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signalled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.