

Readings for the Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

9th February 2025

First Reading: 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!”

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

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.

Gospel: St 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.

A Reflection for the Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

My mother used to say that she remembered exactly where she was and what she was doing when President Kennedy was assassinated. I could say the same about the events of 9/11 and I am sure most of us have similar markers in our lives; times when there has been a significant event which we feel will change the world. And there can be similar markers in our own personal lives – not necessarily disasters, but the cycle of births, marriages and deaths that characterise and change all our lives. We all have these experiences that draw us up short, that make us stop and think more deeply about the world and our lives than usual.

For the prophet Isaiah, the year that King Uzziah died was such a marker. Uzziah had been king for 52 years and, perhaps in a similar way as it was for us when the late Queen died in 2022, it was the end of an era. Something that, for many, had always been a given, part of the backdrop of our lives whatever our opinion of monarchy, was suddenly no longer there. The death of the king was a marker for Isaiah, but it was another event in that year that brought him up short, that made him stop and think: Isaiah encountered God in the Temple in a particularly dramatic way.

In our readings today, we hear of three encounters with God that are all different. Isaiah was in the Temple and saw God in glory on the throne of heaven with accompanying seraphs in song, followed by an earthquake and smoke. It is a fearful sight, and Isaiah was filled with a sense of his own lowliness and inadequacy, and yet he knew that he had been privileged to see something truly amazing that is not granted to many humans. But there is more: a seraph came to him and, touching him with a live coal, declared that he was free from the guilt and sin that led him to those feelings of inadequacy.

Then in the passage from his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul declares that the risen Jesus appeared to many people, including him. Although he does not provide further detail in this passage, we know, from Acts and Paul’s own words in his letter to the Galatians, of his Damascus road encounter with Jesus, of the blinding light and the voice from heaven that turned his life around for ever. It’s a significant event in the history of the church that was celebrated just a couple of weeks ago, on 25th January. Like Isaiah, Paul, too, knew his own inadequacy; he describes himself here as ‘least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God’, but he was granted the grace of God with him.

And finally, in our Gospel, we have the story of Simon Peter, a fisherman whose boat was borrowed by an itinerant preacher who then told him to put out again into deep water and cast his nets, even though he had been fishing all night and caught nothing. Against his better judgment as he thought, he did so, and the catch was so great the nets began to break. Scales fell from Simon Peter’s eyes as he realised that this was no ordinary preacher and he

recognised the divine, calling Jesus 'Lord'. And he too was overcome by his own sinfulness and inadequacy: 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man', but Jesus' response to him was 'Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.'

Three people, three very different encounters with God; all recognised their own failings in the presence of God, and all had their anxieties on that front set aside. And all of them were called to new challenges: Isaiah to declare God's judgment and call God's people back to faithful living; Paul to proclaim the Gospel message to the nations; Peter to leave everything and follow Jesus as one of his first disciples.

These three are not unique however; we all have our own encounters with God. What have your experiences been? Most of us have probably not had the same dramatic experience as Isaiah with flying seraphs, smoke, earthquakes and burning coals. But maybe, like him, you have encountered God in a meaningful way in your sacred space: a great and glorious cathedral, or a small rural church resonant with holiness and prayer, or in the magnificent temple of creation. Or perhaps, like Paul, you have had a Damascus road type encounter, a vivid experience of God when you least expected it. Or perhaps, like Simon Peter, it has been amidst the ordinariness of our everyday lives that God has butted in.

Whoever we are, God is calling each one of us, just as he called Isaiah and Paul and Simon Peter. Such calls are not just for 'special' people. God calls us each of us into relationship with him, to follow him, so that we can be Christ's hands and feet and heart and voice in the world, to speak his truth, to love his people, to do his deeds of compassion. We each have our own ministry.

How do we respond? How do we follow? In today's examples from Scripture, of course, all three accepted God's call on their lives, and followed faithfully, even though that turned out to be extremely demanding and difficult for each of them. But we know that not everyone responded to God positively. Many rejected Isaiah's message and Paul was persecuted. Two weeks ago, our Gospel passage was the account of Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth, where many people were unable to recognise that God was there in the midst of their ordinary lives, and many more rejected Jesus during the years of his ministry on earth. Those are a reminder not to be so tied up with our preoccupations and preconceptions that we fail to notice God in our midst and God's call in our lives.

So how do we respond? How do we follow? There's no set answer because it's different for each of us. We each have different passions and talents and find ourselves in different circumstances. So we need to be conscious of what is possible, what we are good at, what the needs are of the world around us and where there is a match. It's good to stop and take stock from time to time, perhaps prompted to do so by a significant event but perhaps as a regular spiritual discipline. We need to do so without false modesty; as we have seen, a sense of inadequacy is not an excuse for inaction. Since many of us do not have dramatic encounters with the divine, we need to be alert to the nudging of God in our lives through our consciences and through the words of those around us: 'Have you ever thought of doing this ...?' or 'You'd be good at that...' God has a different ministry for each of us and God will keep calling us to that. It's never too late to respond.

God says to each of us: 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?'

'Here am I; send me!'