



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, February 6, 2022
The Fifth Sunday After the Epiphany

Festal Eucharist
11am

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Canon Carl Turner, *Rector*
on
Isaiah 6:1-8; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11
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Putting out into the Deep.

“All the kings of the earth shall praise thee, O Lord: for they have heard the words of thy mouth. Yea, they shall sing in the ways of the Lord: that great is the glory of the Lord.” Words from Psalm 138 that the choir sang just a few moments ago which echo the vision of Isaiah who glimpsed the glory of the Lord in the Temple: *“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.”* Isaiah saw the Seraphs who wait upon God. In the Christian tradition, Seraphs are the highest order of angels because they attend the Lord continually, proclaiming his glory, and are close to his presence. From the teaching of the early Church Fathers to the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, Seraphs have been associated with light, heat, and fire which Aquinas describes as penetrating all things and bringing cleansing. Aquinas also interpreted their continual movement (after all they have six wings) as a sign that we should be drawn closer and closer to the Lord, just as fire is continually moving upwards.

The Seraphs have a particular song, known in the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom as the *Trisagion*:

*“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”*

That same song will be heard again in the mass when the choir sings the Sanctus, joining their voices with the voices of angels and archangels, and all the company of heaven, that is, with the Seraphs. And note, that when the Seraphs sing the Trisagion, the Temple shook at its very foundations, and the Temple was filled with incense. It is a remarkable vision and, as St. Ignatius Loyola would encourage us to do, we should let our imaginations run away with it.

What is the response of Isaiah to this amazing sight? Isaiah 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!”* The natural response to seeing the glory of the Lord is to feel unclean and unworthy, recognizing that one is a sinner. Significantly, it was one of the Seraphs, one of the fiery creatures close to God, that mediates and cleansed Isaiah of his sinful state. Only then could Isaiah answer God’s question, *“Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”* Isaiah replied immediately, *“Here am I; send me!”*

If we turn to the Gospel reading today, we will discover parallels with our Old Testament Reading; Jesus had such a crowd around him that it was becoming impossible to see them all. Perhaps he was being pushed off the shore and into the Lake! So, very practically, Jesus got into a boat – Simon Peter’s boat – and asked him

to pull away from the shore a little so that he could address the crowd. He did so sitting in the boat, a sign of his authority as a teacher (which, incidentally, is also why Bishops have traditionally preached from their Cathedra or Chair from the earliest days of the Church).

There is a beautiful painting of this scene, unfinished, by the great British visionary painter, Stanley Spencer, begun almost ten years before his death in 1959. It is a huge painting – seven feet tall and 18 feet wide, titled ‘Christ Preaching at Cookham Regatta.’ Now, Cookham is a village on the River Thames in Berkshire where Stanley Spencer was born, and which featured in many of his paintings. The painting and the panels that were painted to accompany it reveal the class structure of Edwardian times, with the wealthy visitors hiring punts for the day and feasting, something locals could not afford to do. Significantly, Jesus does not sit in a punt, but in the ‘Horse Ferry Barge’ that was used to carry people across the River Thames before a road bridge was built. At the heart of the painting, Jesus, wearing a straw boater, and sitting in a rattan chair with his disciples, is leaning forward in sharp contrast to the shenanigans going on in the punts around him. There is an intensity in the movement of Jesus – connecting with the crowd, and challenging them at the same time.

In the Gospel account, after he had finished teaching, Jesus asked Simon Peter to take the boat away from the shallows, and to put into deep water, to go fishing. You can imagine his frustration! They had had a miserable night’s fishing because they had caught nothing which, of course, would mean that Simon and his colleagues were probably exhausted. Furthermore, they had been washing the nets when Jesus appeared with the crowd; I guess they probably just wanted to go home. Nevertheless, Simon half-heartedly agrees to go into the deep - and the catch was so great that the nets began to break, and James and John had to come to Simon’s aid. But more than that, the catch of fish starts to make *both* boats sink! What is Simon’s response to all of this? He fell to his knees and cried out “*Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!*” Does that sound familiar? “*Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips*” said Isaiah when he saw the glory of the Lord. And just as Isaiah received cleansing, so did Simon Peter, except that this time, there was no need of an intermediary, no Seraph or angelic spirit, for we read that Jesus said to Peter, “*Do not be afraid.*” Jesus, himself, the perfect image of the invisible God, reveals God’s glory in his very self and makes Simon Peter whole again.

The natural response to glimpsing the presence of God is fear, awe, and a sense of unworthiness and sin. Yet in the case of Isaiah and Peter, God saw past their sin and unworthiness, and called them into a new relationship, giving them a mission to perform: “*Whom shall I send?*” said God, “*and who will go for us?*” Isaiah replied, “*Here am I; send me!*” Jesus said to Peter, “*From now on you will be catching people.*”

Our Epistle reading also has parallels with this theme of unworthiness preceding the Divine call. Paul is reflecting on the response of the Apostles to the Resurrection, and the importance of handing on the story - proclaiming the Gospel – how he was handing on that which he had received. But how does Paul describe meeting the Lord? “*Last of all,*” he says, “*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.*” Jesus looked beyond his failings and weaknesses. In fact, he called Paul *with* his failings and weaknesses, just as he called Peter, and James, and John, yes even Judas Iscariot who betrayed him. “*By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain.*”

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Note the pattern. Acknowledging one’s unworthiness which results in God’s call. As St. Thérèse of Lisieux used to say, “*God does not call the people worthy of the calling, no, he chooses the people it pleases him to call.*” That is why every liturgy, even the Coronation Liturgy of Queen Elizabeth II, includes confession and absolution – a stripping away of status – an acknowledgement of our need of grace. Ironically, it is in acknowledging our own unworthiness that we are able to truly answer God’s call.

As we draw near to Holy Communion today, we shall repeat the words of the centurion who met Jesus, when he pleaded with him to heal his servant, *“Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldst come under my roof.”* Our response to the singing of the Trisagion, to the real presence of Jesus in the Sacrament of his Body and Blood, is naturally one of unworthiness, just like Isaiah; just like Peter; just like the Centurion. But the response of Jesus is to call us into a deeper relationship with him, to ‘put out into the deep water’ as it were, in response to his call. Jesus looks at you and me in the same way and says, *“Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?”* Can we, like them, say **“Here am I; send me!”**