

Epiphany 5; Year C: Isaiah 6:1-13; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11; Psalm 138.

+ May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to almighty God. Amen.

Last month I was exceptionally lucky to be sent by the Seminary to take a class in Jerusalem. While I was there—as well as bumping unexpectedly into Anne Arms together with Bishop Eugene—I visited the Church of the Holy Sepulcher to see the reputed place of Christ’s burial, death, and resurrection. Even though I was there one morning in January, the line of pilgrims seeking to enter the empty tomb was lengthy.

Christians of every nation and denomination had come from all over the world, some at great financial sacrifice, in response to the invitation that the angel makes to the two Marys at the end of Matthew’s Gospel: “He is not here; for he has been raised [says the angel]. Come and see the place where he lay”. People were excited to be there, and while I wouldn’t say there was shoving, there was certainly a good deal of gentle pushing as the crowd squeezed toward the tiny door into the empty tomb.

There was a group of American pilgrims in front of me. I had been overhearing their conversation for quite a long time. Given all the other attractions, they were somewhat ambivalent about the length of the line. A number had soon given-up when they realized that they may have to wait for over an hour. And now they were complaining that the amount of pushing and the lack of respect for personal space simply wasn’t Christian. I certainly empathized with that group, but I couldn’t help but think they were missing-out somehow. They just couldn’t comprehend how eager the people around them were to see the empty tomb and have their relationship with God strengthened by this confirmation of Christ’s resurrection.

In today's Gospel, as in so many other places, the crowds are described as "pressing in on" Jesus to hear the word of God. They just want to be near him and they don't seem to mind just how impractical this is. There's no way that Jesus can teach them when they have him pressed right up against the lakeshore.

Now this isn't quite the beginning of Jesus' ministry: he has been teaching; he's cast out a demon; and he has healed a sick woman. But so far Jesus ministry is solo ministry, he has no helpers, no one to assist in managing this crowd, and he has become a victim of his own success. Just as in the following verses Simon Peter and his companions are going to need some help coping with the miraculous catch of fish that they have in their net, so too, Jesus needs some help dealing with the huge number of people who have become hooked on his word. So, he asks Simon to take him out a little way from the shore to create enough distance between him and the crowd that he might be able to teach them.

Now, we all know that Jesus could have just walked out on the water. He doesn't *need* Peter's boat. But, in our readings today, that is not the way that we see God use power. In our readings today, we see that God's power works through relationships. Today's Gospel reading begins with Jesus initiating a relationship with Peter that begins with a request to use his boat, and ends with Peter leaving his boat on the shore and joining Jesus in work of the Kingdom of God. Instead of catching fish in a net, he sets about drawing people into a network of relationship, relationships through which God's power is at work.

Since God chooses to use his power through his relationship with his people, we might be startled when we turn to Isaiah, a book that we are used to looking at for its promise of redemption and the coming of the messiah, and we hear some

chilling words that Isaiah is given to proclaim to Judah: “Keep listening, but do not understand; keep looking but do not comprehend.”

These words are all the more chilling because we all have some experience of what they imply. When we look at the divisions within this nation, we are keenly aware of our inability to understand why some people talk and act as they do. And we often experience the political positions of our neighbors and our own inability to relate to them as sources of great pain. We see and hear one another, but we do not understand, and we do not comprehend. And that same disconnection is often at the root of problems within our personal relationships. We all of us know the pain of finding ourselves simply unable to understand the actions of a beloved friend or family member.

And we all know that our inability to understand one another—within this nation, within the Church, or within our families—reflects a brokenness within our relationships. Not necessarily a brokenness that cannot be healed, but a painful brokenness nonetheless.

So to hear the Lord command Isaiah to tell the people of Judah to “keep Listening, but not understand” is difficult and requires us to remember that this short passage is only a very small part of Isaiah’s prophesy. To understand the tone of those words we need to remember that in the preceding chapters, God laments that his people have turned *their* back on *God* and have taken to the worship of false idols. As a result, their relationship with one another have broken down too. Instead of caring for the poor, the widow and the orphan—as God has commanded—they have begun attending only to their own material wealth. God laments:

“the ox knows its owner,
and the donkey its master’s crib;
but Israel does not know,
my people do not understand.”

And God makes efforts to mend that broken relationship with his people:

“Come now, let us argue it out,
says the Lord:
though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be like snow;
though they are red like crimson,
they shall become like wool.”

But we all of us know that the thing about relationships is that it takes two to make them work. In Isaiah, the relationship between God and his people has become so broken, that the people are now unwilling and unable to hear his word. God’s words—“keep listening, but do not understand; keep looking but do not comprehend”—are a painful statement of what is already the case. But this is not, as it might sound, a God who has given-up on his people, but rather this is a God who—even when the situation seems hopeless—is sending out prophets with the promise that his people will one day be reconciled with God *and* with one another.

“In the year the King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne high and lofty”, Isaiah tells us before going on to describe a scene of such grandeur that King Uzziah can never have seen anything close to it: the smoke; the flying seraphim; the ground quacking at the sound of their song of God’s glory. There can be no question that this God is a force to be reckoned with. But unlike an earthly

ruler, God is not going to use force to try and compel his people to do as he would like. They—like us—are free to make their own mistakes. Amongst the grandeur of Isaiah’s throne room scene, we hear the voice of God cry out, asking “Whom shall I send and who will go for us?” And it is Isaiah, the “man of unclean lips from a people of unclean lips” that volunteers, and, because God uses his power through relationship, it is Isaiah that God sends with the seemingly impossible task of preaching his word in world that will not hear.

If we were feeling especially impudent, we might wonder if God has the most sensible approach here. We might think that there must be a more efficient way for God to use his power to bring about the Kingdom. And yet, in today’s Epistle, we read that God reaches out to Paul a man who is, by his own confession “unfit to be called an apostle, because [he has] persecuted the church”. And Paul, through his renewed relationship with God, becomes our first and greatest theologian whose work is still helping us to know and be in relationship with God today.

And God calls Peter, a humble fisherman, who in today’s Gospel proclaims himself to be a sinner, but who, through his relationship with God, becomes the rock on which God’s church is built. And while Isaiah who may not have been heard by his own people, we are still hearing his words of prophecy 27 centuries later.

What unites these three is the humility they profess before God, and their ultimate willingness to allow God to work through them despite their shortcomings: their willingness to get caught-up in the network of relationships that God instigates and to allow God’s power to work through them.

And now, God call us.

“Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to God from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever”.

Amen.