

Homily for People and Parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday 9th February 2025, Epiphany 5

Readings: **Isaiah 6:1-8 (9-13)**

Psalms 138

1Corinthians 15:1-11

Luke 5:1-11

I wonder if you have ever had a sense that you've gained some wisdom, or new insight, from a dream? You may have been wrestling with a question, a decision, or an issue, and somehow, through a dream you recognise a way forward. You wake up and that way forward is clear. You may have thought it was your unconscious mind processing something you were wrestling with, or you may have had a sense God was trying to get your attention – but the process happened while you were dreaming.

In today's well-known passage from Isaiah the prophet had a waking dream, or vision, and in this found himself in what he believed to be the very throne room of God! The face of God is not described but Isaiah tells us that the hem of God's robe filled the temple, and there were present in the dream, six-winged creatures who were singing, *'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts...'*

Isaiah asserts that he was filled with fear for he understood himself to be in the very presence of God, and that nothing was hidden. *'Woe is me!'* Isaiah called out – *'Woe is me!'* It's not a surprise that he was afraid because an Old Testament understanding of God is that God will judge us on whether or not we have kept religious law and that when we fall short of this there will be terrible punishment!

There were coals burning in the vision and one of the six-winged creatures took a coal in a pair of tongs and touched Isaiah's mouth saying, *'Now that this has touched your lips your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.'*

Isaiah had a good sense of his short-comings and his selfishness and had called out *'Woe is me!'*, but in response to this: Isaiah was loved, forgiven, and set free to live differently.

In that new freedom, the text continues, Isaiah heard God asking the question, *"Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"* and, Isaiah responded enthusiastically. I imagine him stretching out his arms and hands to attract God's attention as he called out - *"Here am I; send me!"*

I wonder what Isaiah thought after experiencing that vision. He could have doubted and wondered if he'd really seen six winged creatures in a throne room. He could have wondered if it really had been God speaking to him, or if it was simply his imagination. However, it seems that Isaiah was left with an ongoing sense that God had really forgiven him, called him, and sent him to do some work. The vision, or dream, was a life-changing

experience for Isaiah, and he had a sense of God speaking to him, and through him, for the rest of his days.

One of the recurring themes in the Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament is that God called particular people to speak and lead with authority, or simply do extraordinary things. It would seem that most of the remembered judges, prophets, priests and kings were men and, there were not many people who enjoyed close connection with God!

In the Greek Scriptures of the New Testament a new experience of God is recorded. For it was a young girl called Mary who was asked by God to do something unique and extraordinary; and it was an adult woman called Mary Magdalene, who first witnessed the risen Christ.

In today's Gospel reading we hear about Jesus calling people to learn from him as disciples, but he didn't go down the Old Testament pattern of calling powerful and well-connected judges, prophets, priests, and kings. Instead, he called everyday working people. I think he called people, like you and me.

To set the scene I think it's helpful to think of Jesus teaching in the synagogue and then people in the community discussing what he'd said in their homes and places of work. He was clearly someone who was passionate about God, and God's justice. He controversially affirmed that God's love was more generous than the religious authorities taught, and he demonstrated spiritual power by healing sick people.

I imagine the fishing community talking about Jesus with their families and their friends and there being a growing sense of hope within the community that maybe this Jesus could be the promised Messiah.

The Gospel writer tells us that one day Jesus had a practical problem because the crowd was too big, and people could not see or hear him. So, Jesus asked a fisherman if he could help by taking him a little way off-shore in his boat so that he could teach the crowd. Simon Peter agreed and must have listened to what he had to say. Once he'd finished teaching Jesus suggested to Simon that he should go out again to the deep water of the lake and put down his fishing nets, and I wonder what Peter thought about that?

He might have wondered if the son of a carpenter was trying to teach him how to fish after he'd been out unsuccessfully fishing all night! However, Peter was curious, so he took the boat out, let the nets down, and those nets became so full of fish that they were at risk of tearing.

Through this experience Peter had a sense that he was in the presence of God, or at the very least someone who was close to God, and like Isaiah in the throne room he was

terrified. He did not say, 'Woe is me!' like Isaiah but said instead, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man."

Like Isaiah, Peter knew that he was a long way from perfect, and hard on the heels of Peter acknowledging this, Jesus asked him to become part of his team!

I think there's something powerful for us as we remember this today for it seems that God is not impressed by the quality of our resume, or the depth of our experience, but rather the attitude of our heart and, the way we treat others.

Some of you know this and respond each day to the invitation of Christ to follow and make a difference for good. While others may be thinking, 'I don't know if I've ever acknowledged a need for God because my life is fine!'; or, because you could not imagine God caring for a pretty-ordinary person who's done some pretty-ordinary things... just like Isaiah and Simon Peter!

Maybe this is the day you say 'Yes!' to God for the first time? Or, maybe you've said 'Yes! to God most days of your life?

Whatever our situation may God's Spirit help each of us respond to God's call this week in a prayer that could go something like this:

'Loving God, here I am! Please give meaning and shape to my life and send me! Send me, and use my little life, abilities, and resources, to make a difference for good! In the name of Christ! Amen.'

It's a good prayer for us as individuals and probably sits well with our culture that affirms individual rights and identity, but as well as being called individually we are also called as a community of faith. With that in mind the prayer could be helpfully reframed in this way:

**'Loving God, here WE are!
Please give meaning and shape to OUR lives and send US!
Send US, and help US use OUR lives, abilities and resources collaboratively
To make a difference for God.
Help us be yeast in the dough of our society so it can rise;
be light in a world that longs to see a way forward;
and salt to people who long for community and love.
In the name of Christ!
Amen.'**