

5th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

There are times in the lives of all of us when we come face to face with the stark reality of our own shortcomings and failure. We just don't come up to our own expectations – which may be unrealistic anyway – and we know that we can't fall back on our own resources to put things right. We feel disabled in a very real way, and the prospect of change is more than a dream away. Our energies are crippled and our hope is in the emergency ward. There doesn't seem to be any way forward. When we don't feel too good about ourselves it's a short trip from there to wondering whether God could possibly have time for the likes of us. Why should God be *bothered* with accomplished sinners like us ?

Similar thoughts appear in our readings today. Isaiah has a vision in the temple in Jerusalem and becomes acutely aware of the holiness of God. When his attention turns to himself, however, it's not much of a vision: he says “What a wretched state I am in. I am lost.” Isaiah sees the holiness of God as a beautiful reality that highlights his own sin and leads him to depression. However, Isaiah doesn't stay around the Temple nurturing his depression; he accepts the forgiveness of God when it is offered. His *conviction* of the reality of God's forgiveness frees him to respond to God's challenge. He is no longer preoccupied with his own unworthiness; God's forgiveness has released him for mission so that he can offer himself: “Here I am, send me.”

The same story is told in the Gospel. Peter and his companions are professional fishermen and do their work at night when the fish come to the surface. They have worked hard at the right time but have caught nothing. Now the expert fishermen are being told by a carpenter to put out during the day ! Peter obeys the word of Jesus, and the word of Jesus comes home to him when they do indeed catch a giant shoal of fish. Peter recognizes the hand of God in what has happened and at the same time realizes his own sinfulness. And his pastoral advice to Jesus is to go away and not be bothered with the likes of him.

Happily, Jesus does not take Peter's advice to put distance between himself and sinners. Jesus has not come to be a hermit with an unreachable address in the desert; rather, his whole mission moves in the opposite direction, for he has come to “seek out and save the lost.” So Jesus travels *into* people's lives, not away from them. He entertains sinners, he enters their homes, meets their families, eats at their table, listens to their stories, and calls them to a new way of life. Throughout his

life Jesus is never far from sinners. And on the cross he will die between two of them.

And Jesus wants Peter to share that mission with him, so he calls Peter away from fixation with his own sinfulness and preoccupation with himself. Peter has acknowledged his own unworthiness. That is enough. Jesus moves the conversation on and invites Peter to see himself as a leader who will bring people close to God. Jesus draws out the worth in Peter and challenges him to do the same by becoming a fisher of God's people. Can Peter draw out the best in people? And if it doesn't make any sense for a fisherman to be far from fish, it won't make any sense for Peter to be far from people. So, Peter follows Jesus.

There is a marvelous teaching here for all of us. Jesus doesn't write us off because we are sinners; he is broadminded when it comes to working with people because he doesn't believe that people should be summarized by their sin. Jesus has other plans because he believes that sinners have a future, not just a past. He can see beyond the sin to the worth of the sinner. As St Paul proclaims: "Christ died for our sins." Christ thought we were worth enough to die for.

Even though Paul admits his own destructive past in persecuting the Church, he is *convinced* that the love of Christ has overcome that. So he writes to the Philippians: "I believe nothing can happen that will outweigh the advantage of knowing Christ Jesus.... All I can say is that I forget the past and strain ahead for what is to come."

As we too will stop doting on our past sinfulness only when we are *convinced* of the central Gospel message: Christ died for our sins.