

Homily for February 2, 2010

Be careful what you ask for. If you seek a deeper, closer relationship with God, be prepared for surprises.

Through the years I have enjoyed telling people that I am a second-class deacon. I am a member of the second class ordained in this archdiocese. I will never forget my experience during the ordination of the first class. I was sitting behind one of the columns in the cathedral, and at first I was annoyed because I had to look around it. But as the ordination of that first class began, I was overwhelmed with fear. Though of course I did not move, I felt as if I were clinging to that column in front of me. I remember saying to God, “Oh, dear Lord, I have made a mistake. You can’t be calling me to be a deacon.” From my teen-age years I believed that God was calling me to serve him in some way and I continued to seek his will for me. It was a long time coming, and when it came—even a year before I was ordained—I felt overwhelmed.

In the Scripture for the day we read about two dramatic encounters with God, those of Isaiah and Peter; and we are reminded of another, that of Paul. I want you to notice, though, that these dramatic experiences do not come in a spiritual vacuum. Each of them—Isaiah, Peter, and Paul—were in some sense in relationship with God already. Isaiah was near the most holy place in the temple in Jerusalem, the center of Jewish worship; Paul, having studied with one of the great Jewish rabbis, was trying to stem the rise of a Jewish heresy, which came to be called Christianity; and Peter certainly had some kind of relationship with Jesus because Jesus had healed his mother-in-law and Peter called him “master.” Thus, all three had placed themselves in a position of openness to God. Though Peter was a fisherman himself and he and his partners had “worked hard all night,” he put out into deep water and lowered his nets at the command of Jesus. These three are men whose minds and hearts were prepared for a profound experience.

And you heard what happened in the reading of the Scripture. God appeared to Isaiah accompanied by seraphic angels. Peter and his partners caught such a net-full of fish that they filled both boats “so that the boats were in danger of sinking.” And in our second reading Paul says, “Last of all, as to one born abnormally, he appeared to me.” That appearance, you recall, occurred as Paul was on his way to Damascus with letters from the high priest to arrest the followers of Jesus. “. . . a light from the sky flashed around him . . . and he heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ He said, ‘Who are you, sir?’ The reply came, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.’” After this experience, Paul, or as he was then called, Saul, was blind for three days. As I said at the beginning of this homily, be careful what you ask for. If you seek a deeper relationship with God, be prepared for surprises.

I want to say also that I believe God reaches out to those whose hearts are not open as well. Many years ago my good friend Jim Goodwin (not his real name), who at the time professed to be an atheist or perhaps an agnostic was devastated when his twenty-one-year-old daughter died of a heart attack. She, by the way, had become Catholic within the previous year. Shortly after her funeral Jim called me to tell me that Lisa had appeared to him in the night and he did not believe that what he saw was a dream. I asked him, “Jim, what are you going to do now?” He responded, “Why . . . nothing. Why should I?”

Notice the responses of the three in today’s readings. Isaiah says, “Woe is me, I am doomed!

For I am a man of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips . . .” Peter says, “Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.” And Paul says, “. . . I am the least of the apostles, not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.” Now, I know many people who beat up on themselves and who have told me that even though they believe God has forgiven them, they cannot forgive themselves. When we respond in this way, the devil laughs. He has us immobilized.

What a difference in the responses of these three men who are open to God! When they recognized their sinfulness and their unworthiness, that’s the time when they became open to our God, who made them and us and who re-made them and can re-make us if we allow him to. How did God respond to Isaiah?

Then one of the seraphim flew to me, holding an ember that he had taken with tongs from the altar. He touched my mouth with it, and said, “See, now that this has touched your lips, your wickedness is removed, your sin purged.”

And to Peter, Jesus said, “Do not be afraid . . . .”

Be careful what you ask for. An encounter with God is not just for one’s own personal well being; it is the prelude to a new way of life—a new way of life with a mission. To Isaiah, God says, “Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?” And Isaiah responded, “Here am I . . . ; send me!” And Jesus said to Peter, “. . . from now on you will be catching men.” St. Paul’s statement today tells us not only about his new way of life but also of the mission and the content of that mission:

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I also received:  
that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures;  
that he was buried; that he was raised on the third day in accordance  
with the Scriptures;  
that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve.

After that, Christ appeared to more than five hundred brothers at once . . . Last of all, . . .he appeared to me. . . .

But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me has not been ineffective. Indeed, I have toiled harder than all of them; not I, however, but the grace of God that is with me.

I still can hardly believe the response of God to the search of a Mississippi country boy brought up as a Southern Baptist who, by the time he finished high school, knew only one Catholic. As a boy I began asking God to show me what he wanted from me and I persisted. Be careful what you ask for. God may give you more than you can possibly imagine.

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