HOMILY FOR SUNDAY ORDINARY 5 YEAR C

7 FEBRUARY 2016 ST BENET’S HALL

Today’s readings seem, at first sight at least, to be very dominated by a sense of sin, by our utter unworthiness in the face of the holiness of God. Isaiah in the first reading receives, in the temple in Jerusalem, his famous vision of God, sitting on a throne high and lifted up, the seraphim chanting ‘Holy, holy, holy’. Isaiah cries out ‘alas for me, what a wretched man I am, a man of unclean lips’. He is wholly, frighteningly unworthy, of this vision of God. St Paul, thinking back to the vision of the risen Christ on the Damascus road given to him, the persecutor of Christ, describes himself as one born out of due season, the least of the apostles. Maybe most movingly, in today’s Gospel, St Luke’s version of the call of the first fishermen to be apostles of the Lord, St Peter, witnessing the miraculous catch of fish, falls to his knees in the boat and cries out ‘Leave me Lord; I am a sinful man’.

In all cases this sense of sin and unworthiness threatens a paralysis of action and response, it brings a desire to be left alone ‘Leave me Lord’. But in all cases this sense of sin and unworthiness is brushed away, almost peremptorily. And this – more than the sense of sin itself – seems to be the real point of the readings. Isaiah’s sinful lips are healed by a glowing coal from the altar and so to the question ‘Who will go for me?’ he is enabled to answer ‘Here I am, send me’. The risen Christ breaks through the persecutor’s brittle defence to constitute him an apostle to the nations. Christ says to Peter in the boat ‘Do not be afraid’ and so when the boat reaches land, the fishermen ‘leave everything and follow him’. Of course we can stay locked in, with our paralyzing sense of sin and unworthiness. But God’s will is to set us free and to empower us to be the people he wants us to be, the people he knows we can be. ‘Be the person God wants you to be’ says St Catherine of Siena ‘and you will set the world on fire’. This was certainly the case for the protagonists in today’s readings, they all set the world on fire.

We sometimes feel that the sense of sin is not so strong as it was once and evidence for this can be attributed to the diminishing use of confession, no longer seen as the inevitable gateway to Sunday communion and evidenced by queues at confessionals disappearing to nothing. On the other hand the sense of sin may be less formulaic and routine, less given to lists as in the tale of the young girl making her first confession, a very long, comprehensive and improbable list, structured according to Ten Commandments and summary of the law, corporal and spiritual works of mercy, all good stuff and concluding with the novel admission of having been printed and published by the Catholic Truth Society. Giving up thinking about other people’s sins and also their lists of sins and rather asking the Lord to reveal ourselves truly to ourselves is likely always a good practice and enables the grace of God to break through to the people we actually and truly are and beyond this to help us to break through to what we yet might be according to God’s gracious and empowering call.

God does not work, at least not in today’s readings, by way of general absolution. His mercy comes in a very particular and human way to each individual in the way they need, to the extent they are capable, to help them along the way that they must take. Isaiah, his lips purified, speaks God’s word to the people of Israel. Paul, his blindness healed, brings the vision of the risen Christ to the nations, he preaches and the people believe. Peter, cast down to his knees by his sense of sinful unworthiness, is raised up to be a rock – for him it will be a long and very hard journey to be the rock on which the faith of the Church will be built. He will fall often along this way, but later in St Luke’s Gospel, Jesus will tell him ‘Simon, Simon! Look, Satan has got his wish to sift you all like wheat; but I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail, and once you have recovered, you in your turn must strengthen your brothers.’ Jesus prays for us, indeed now he lives ever to intercede for us (Hebrews 7:25). This prayer will reach us, sustain us, recreate us in the myriad ways of our own individuality but always shaping us to be the individuals God wants us to be, the individuals we yet can be. This will be a fire indeed for the present and for the Kingdom.

It so happens that this year we celebrate this Sunday Mass and hear these readings on the verge of Ash Wednesday and Lent. A season as St Benedict reminds his monks for washing away the ‘negligences of other times’ but they are to do this ‘with the joy of the Holy Spirit’ and to look forward to holy Easter ‘with joy and spiritual longing’, two of the three mentions of joy in the Rule. In today’s gospel before the miraculous catch and the call, Jesus tells Peter to make for the depths. We have to go to the depths of our own lives and hearts to hear his call and know what he will do with us. We do not know where this will take us, but it will be to a place of deep joy.