

## Commentary to the Fifth Sunday in ordinary time – Year C

### WE BRING A GREAT TREASURE IN EARTHEN VESSEL

#### Introduction

Today's readings present some characters who are called to carry out a mission of proclaiming the Word of God. They all have the same reaction: they feel unworthy, incapable, and inadequate. Isaiah declares himself to be a man of unclean lips. Peter asks Jesus to turn away from him because he knows he is a sinner. Paul says that the Risen One was manifested to him, but "as to an abortion," that is, as an imperfect being, one born abnormally.



We could continue with the list of statements of unworthiness looking at the objections of Jeremiah: "Ah, Lord God, I do not know how to speak. I am still young" (Jer 1:6) and Moses: "But, my Lord, never have I been a fluent speaker. I cannot find words to express what I want to say" (Ex 4:10). Call to announce the Word of God today are given to permanent deacons, catechists, and the animators of the listening centers.

On the other hand, there are also—it is true—some who, oblivious to their limitations, feel too sure of themselves. But most people, aware of their miseries, say that they are not up to the required task. The lack of preparation is not a good reason to hold back. The study, regular participation in biblical and pastoral courses, and a small theological library can supply what is lacking. The perception of one's spiritual inadequacy must be overcome, bearing in mind the work of God. He purifies his prophets and apostles and enables them to proclaim his message.



*"Purify, Lord, my heart and my lips, so that I may announce your Gospel."*

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First Reading: Isaiah 6:1-8

In the year King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne, with the train of his garment filling the temple. Seraphim were stationed above.

They cried one to the other, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts! All the earth is filled with his glory!” At the sound of that cry, the frame of the door shook and the house was filled with smoke.

Then I said, “Woe is me, I am doomed! For I am a man of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” 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.”

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?” “Here I am,” I said; “send me!” —The Word of the Lord.

There are experiences of our lives that cannot be told with words. Emotions, feelings, and spiritual experiences are not easy to describe. That is why Isaiah, wishing to present the story of his vocation, can only resort to images. It would be naive to interpret what is told in this reading as a report; God does not need to sit down, cover himself with a mantle against the cold, or be assisted by the seraphim’s as if they were his bodyguards. Isaiah did not have an apparition, but an inner experience told in the form of a vision.

One day, perhaps while he was praying in the temple of Jerusalem, he realized that the Lord calls him to be his prophet. He is shocked; he understands that this is the will of the Lord of the universe, the Almighty, who has his throne in heaven and is supported by seraphim singing without end: “*Holy, holy, holy!*” (vv. 1-4). He becomes aware of his weakness and unworthiness and is afraid of the mission given to him. How could he, “*a man of unclean lips,*” speak the Word of God three times holy? (v. 5).

The Lord has decided to carry out his work of salvation using people who are vulnerable and weak. He purifies them, enables them to convey his message. Isaiah sees a cherub take the sacred fire, touch his lips and erase his iniquity (vv. 6-7). Now he can no longer resist the call of the Lord. He answers, “*Here am I. Send me!*” (v. 8).

As long as one lives among weak and fragile people, he does not realize his own sin. If he compares himself with those around him, he may feel better, more just, honest, and blameless.

As soon as he encounters the Lord, the perspective changes, and it becomes a dramatic experience of his smallness, unworthiness, and misery. *“Even the moon is not bright—the book of Job recalls—nor are the stars pure in his sight, how much less man, a worm”* (Job 25:5-6).

This experience—painful, but healthy and purifying—is proven by all those who draw near to God’s word, to that word that *“is sharper than any two-edged sword; it pierces to the division of soul and spirit... and judges the thoughts and intentions of the heart* (Heb 4:12). It is like the feeling of unworthiness of priests, leaders of communities, and catechists who, while explaining the Word of God, realize, with regret, that their behavior is in stark contrast to what they teach.

Should they be discouraged? Should they reject the call of the Lord to carry out the ministry of the Word? Isaiah, while feeling unworthy, has no hesitations. He says quickly: *“Here I am, send me”* (v. 8). His sins are not a reason to justify the refusal to assume the community's responsibility to each of her members. The Word of God that is proclaimed has the power to purify those who announce it gradually.

### Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

I am reminding you, brothers and sisters, of the gospel I preached to you, which you indeed received and in which you also stand. Through it you are also being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. 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, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. After that he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one born abnormally, he appeared to me. For I am the least of the apostles, not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 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. Therefore, whether it be I or they, so we preach and so you believed. —The Word of the Lord.

In Corinth, many have received the Gospel as an admirable moral doctrine, helpful in living wisely. However, even among Christians, many people have difficulty believing in the resurrection. They say that, after death, people disappear entirely or, at most, their spiritual side lives on, which is nothing more than a shadow.

Paul reacts so hard against this strain of the central truth of the Christian message. He says: a person who has this kind of faith believes in vain (v. 2). Then he reminds the Corinthians of the

profession of faith proclaimed in all communities: “*Christ died for our sins as Scripture says, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures*” (v. 4).

After presenting this “Credo” of the early Christians, Paul recalls the six manifestations of the risen Jesus: to Peter, to the Twelve, to more than five hundred brothers, to James, to all the apostles, and lastly, to himself.

What is the significance of this list? These ‘witnesses’ are not the same as those who present themselves to tell the judge how things happened during a trial in court. The resurrection is not a matter of this world; it cannot be demonstrated by conclusive evidence. It is something that happens in the world of God and, therefore, it escapes our senses.

What could be verified with certainty is the change that occurred to the group of disciples. Before, they were afraid, and then they lost all fear; even in the face of those who threatened them to death, they declared that Jesus was alive. From being a persecutor, Paul became an apostle and considered “junk” all the religious certainties that he possessed before (Phil 3:8). The protagonists explain these radical changes unanimously: they are due to their transformative experience of the Risen One.

They have not arrived at this faith quickly. They came there gradually, guided by Scriptures and enlightened by the Spirit. Presenting us their unique and unrepeatable experience, Paul urges us to make our journey. He suggests learning the Scriptures and hearing the Word of God proclaimed in the Christian communities; he invites us to open our hearts to the light of the Spirit. So, it will be possible also today to make not an identical experience but similar to theirs.

### Gospel: Luke 5:1-11

While the crowd was pressing in on Jesus and listening to the word of God, he was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret. He saw two boats there alongside the lake; the fishermen had disembarked and were washing their nets. Getting into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, he asked him to put out a short distance from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. After he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into deep water and lower your nets for a catch.” Simon said in reply, “Master, we have worked hard all night and have caught nothing, but at your command I will lower the nets.” When they had done this, they caught a great number of fish and their nets were tearing. They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come to help them. They came and filled both boats so that the boats were in danger of sinking. When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at the knees of Jesus and said, “Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.” For astonishment at the catch of fish they had made seized him and all those with him, and likewise James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who were partners of Simon. Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be

catching men.” When they brought their boats to the shore, they left everything and followed him. —The Gospel of the Lord.

As the Lord, a Christian is also “*a lover of life*” (Wis 11:26), desires life, and commits oneself to life. “*I have come that they may have life, life in all its fullness*”—Jesus says, referring to his mission among people (Jn 10:10). How can one fulfill Jesus’ mission today? What responsibility has he assigned to his disciples? Luke does not respond to these questions with reasoning but with a story: the call of the first three apostles.

The episode takes place on the Lake of Gennesaret. Jesus is pressed by the crowds and, seeing two boats of fishers, goes into that of Peter, asks him to put out a little off the ground, sits down, and begins to teach the people (vv. 1-3). The frame is not realistic (think how uncomfortable speaking from a boat to a large crowd). The scene is deliberately idealized to transmit a theological message. We notice above all the context in which it is set: on the shore of the lake and a weekday, while people are engaged in their work, while they are sweating to earn a living.

It is not only during the liturgy on Saturday and in the environments and places of worship that Jesus proclaims the Word of God. He proclaims in all contexts, in those sacred and profane ones, because it enlightens, inspires, and guides all activities of people. He sits—that is, he assumes the position of a teacher—in Peter’s boat. The symbolism is obvious: the boat represents the Christian community. It is that privileged place from which we can expect the voice of the Master. To him, one who looks for light, consolation, and hope is invited to turn his gaze.

Together with Jesus, on the boat, there are no exceptional, holy, and perfect people! Only God is holy. There are good people, but they are also sinful. Peter will recognize it also on behalf of others: “*Leave me, Lord, for I am a sinful man*” (v. 8). However, despite being occupied by sinners, it is from this boat that the Word of God is proclaimed.

Action follows the proclamation of the Word (vv. 1-3). On the orders of the Master, the boat sets sail, venturing on the waters of the sea. The disciples are invited to cast their nets and fish (vv. 4-7). It represents the Christian community, animated by the Gospel message she has heard and assimilated, is dispersed through the world's streets to carry out its mission.

To Peter, the order given by Jesus is senseless: that is not the appropriate time to fish. But he trusts. He is the first person who manifests his faith in the word of the Master during Jesus’ public life. It is a considerable risk that Peter is willing to take. He knows that, if unsuccessful, he is exposed to ridicule and jokes of his colleagues. Human logic would suggest him to give up, but he prefers to obey. After a moment of uncertainty, he decides and sets off to work. He believes that the word of Jesus can accomplish the impossible. He has already experienced the power of this word when he saw his mother-in-law cured instantly of fever (Lk 4:38-39).



The result is amazing, the amount of fish caught is enormous, and the evangelist highlights the various details: the nets are going to break, he should seek the help of his friends, and the boats are fully loaded and in danger of sinking.

At this point, Luke introduces the reaction of Peter and those who witnessed the miracle. Simon throws himself at Jesus' knees and declares his unworthiness: "*Leave me, Lord, for I am a sinful man*"—he says, while others are caught by surprise (vv. 8-10a). It's the way the Bible narrates the encounter with the Lord: Moses covers his face because he is afraid (Ex 3:6), and Elijah covers his face with his mantle (1 K 19:13). Like Isaiah—we saw it in the First Reading—Peter also feels sinful. Not because he, until then, had led a sinful life, but realizes the distance that separates him from God and confesses his unworthiness.

This brings us to the central theme of the passage (vv. 10b-11). The main reason why Luke recounts the episode is to make it clear to the disciples of his community that their task is to be fishers of people. The fish, we know, is fine in the water and are not at all happy to be pulled out. In the water, however, people are not equally at ease, especially in the immense, deep, dark, and agitated sea. The fish pulled out of the water dies, but people, instead, live. Jesus uses this symbolism to explain to his disciples what their mission is. He does not invite them to 'take people with fishhooks,' but to get them out alive, with the net, from the crashing waves from which they risk being overwhelmed, submerged, and dragged on to the bottom.

The verb used by the evangelist to describe this mission is not really 'to fish,' but to 'take to keep alive' (Nm 31:15,18; Deut 20:16; Jos 2:13; 6:24...) and therefore to bring to life. In the Bible, the waters of the sea symbolize the power of evil, the forces that lead to death. People who must be 'caught,' that is, helped to live, are those who feel overwhelmed by their vices, their unruly passions, and who are only capable of harming themselves and others. "Fish" to be pulled out of its hopeless condition is all of humanity that is likely to be engulfed by violence and hatred, war, and moral corruption.

Saint Ambrose said: "The tools of apostolic fishing are the nets; they do not cause the death of those who are caught, but they keep them for life. They draw them from the depths to light and from the bottom to the surface those who were submerged." This mission is not entrusted only to the priests but to the whole Christian community.

A final element emphasized in this symbolism of the passage is the ministry entrusted to Peter. He is the one who drives the boat to the place indicated (v. 4); it is he who proclaims his faith in the power of the word of Jesus (v. 5), it is he who recognizes him as Lord (v. 8); it is to him that the invitation to be a fisher of people is directed (v. 10). All these elements indicate that Peter has a particular task to carry out in the Church: to listen attentively to the Word of the Lord and then to lead, together with the other disciples, not where their professional experience and abilities would lead to but where the Master tells him.

The passage is not intended to solicit those in the Christian community to carry out the ministry

of leadership, to claim for themselves the right to command, to impose, or even to make themselves masters over the people of God (1 Pet 5:3). It is an invitation to verify the way of exercising the charism of authority. Do they have complete confidence in the Master's voice? Do they know how to recognize this voice? Are they able to distinguish it from the "wisdom of the world," the "common sense," and human calculations, their insights, and their personal beliefs?

Every Christian is called to do this examination of conscience. Each should be concerned if no one ever considers him an illusion, a dreamer, one who is also ready to 'fish at midday' if the Teacher asks him.

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