

Luke 5:1-11

Isaiah 6:1-8; 1 Cor 15:1-11

When it comes to the various social ills which affect our society today, people tend to come up with all sorts of explanations as to why these kind of things occur. At the present time, a particular concern is that of knife crime and gang-related violence. Politicians and social commentators often identify certain factors which they believe to be the main causes of the problem - a reduction in numbers of police on our streets, government policy, a breakdown of family life, a discontent amongst young people in society; all of these things, no doubt, have *some* part to play in the matter. But in the end, these explanations fail to get to the very root of the problem – namely, sin. Because when we actually acknowledge this, we're forced to accept that it's not simply *other* people who are the problem, but that we ourselves are part of the problem too – we're *all* sinful, fallen human beings. And as Christian believers, in particular, we make this assertion, not with any sense of moral

superiority, but because we are those who recognise that evil is real, and that each one of us is tainted by sin.

In the same way, Peter's response to what he experiences with the extraordinary catch of fish in today's Gospel reading, gets to the heart of the problem with our human condition. Picture the scene. The fishermen were getting on with their normal routine - checking and cleaning their equipment between fishing trips. During this 'rest period' for the fishermen, Jesus comes along and asks to make use of Simon Peter's boat from which he could teach the crowds. At the end of his teaching, Jesus turns to Simon Peter, commanding him to put out his nets into deep water. Peter, though, is clearly rather sceptical – after all, if *they*, the experts, couldn't catch anything all night, why does Jesus think he knows any better than them? Nonetheless, despite his doubt, Peter obeys – and his obedience pays off, as it results in the miraculous catch of fish. The miracle wasn't simply a reward for the use of Peter's boat, but was clearly intended by

the Lord to demonstrate to them his identity and his power. The expertise of the fisherman proves to be as nothing, compared to the power of Jesus. Jesus connects with them through an action that would have been very meaningful to them personally as fishermen.

And amidst all this comes that declaration of Peter, recognising his own sinfulness and the holiness of Jesus, the presence of God among them – “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” He recognises his unworthiness to be with Jesus – acknowledging his wickedness in light of the amazing grace of God he has experienced in the miraculous catch of fish. So his natural reaction is to ask Jesus to go away from him. But the Lord has other plans for him; on the contrary, he actually calls Peter and the others to follow him. It marks a radical change of direction in their lives from a focus on catching fish to fishing for people. And so they give up everything, not least their livelihood, to follow Jesus – a demonstration of real commitment.

Now Peter’s encounter with Jesus has echoes of various other accounts in Scripture where individuals experience the glory of God in a very personal and powerful way. One of the most obvious examples is the calling of Isaiah, found in today’s Old Testament reading, where the prophet experiences a vision of the Thrice-holy God in the Temple, filling the house with smoke. It’s an encounter with the living God, which, in turn, causes the prophet to become deeply aware of his own sinfulness – “I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”, he declares. His reaction to the manifestation of God’s absolute holiness is one of utter shame and fear. And yet, matters aren’t simply left there. As the seraph touches his lips with the live coal, Isaiah receives God’s forgiveness, and he’s then commissioned by God to be his prophet - a prophet who is charged with the unenviable task of warning God’s people that their exile from the promised land is inevitable, yet at the same time, holding out the hope of new life after exile. In the same way, if *Peter* was to share in Christ’s ministry of calling people to

repentance, he himself needed to acknowledge his own sinfulness and experience God's grace and forgiveness for himself.

So, what do these encounters with the Lord have to say to *us*, as those called to follow him today? Well, here are three things:

First of all, as with Peter, *we* need to allow the Lord to rule over *every* aspect of our lives. Peter allowed Jesus to use his boat for preaching, but when the boat reverted back to being used for fishing, Peter saw this as *his* area of expertise – it wasn't for Jesus to interfere with. But he had to learn that Jesus has jurisdiction over his *work* as well; in fact, as Peter discovers, the Lord knows more about fishing than *he* does! I think there's a danger that *we* can all too easily end up compartmentalising our lives – keeping God safely in one box, and seeing everything else as being somehow outside of his remit. But, whatever our situation – we have to allow the Lord to *be* Lord over *all* of our life, in *all* its various aspects – our work, our leisure, every decision we make, our

financial dealings, etc. Do we regularly pray for guidance as to how we can be good stewards of the money and material possessions God has entrusted to us? Do we constantly ask the Lord for his guidance in all our varied tasks and relationships at work? Do we seek his guidance as to where and when we might take a holiday or short break? Let's not forget - *all* our business is *God's* business.

Secondly, there's a need to recover an understanding of the seriousness of sin. There's a marked tendency in western society to try and explain away evil in different ways, rather than simply facing up to its reality, whether it be in the world, in our communities, or in our own lives. Alternatively, many people attempt to deflect the problem of sin onto *others* – '*they're* the ones who are bad, not me!' Whatever the case, the fact remains that sin abounds now as ever. And alongside this, I believe there is a need to recognise and acknowledge the holiness of Almighty God. "Lord, you are holy indeed, the source of all holiness", we say in one of the Communion Prayers - but do we

truly acknowledge this in our own walk of faith? Yes, we can indeed know God as our friend. But this privilege comes only because Jesus has made it possible through his death on the Cross. We're totally unworthy to approach God through our *own* merit.

In the 'Advent' section of the Diocese's 'Year of Vocation' booklet, it says this: "How and when do you find a way of owning up to yourself and to God what you have done wrong, being sorry, and changing so as to be different in future? (Remember that this is part of every act of worship and one you should prepare for as carefully as if you were reading a lesson or leading the prayers)." I think this is a really helpful reminder to us - firstly, that we should take time to repent of our sinfulness every time we come before the Lord in personal prayer, and secondly, when we come together for worship to take a moment to reflect upon the words of the confession which we use in the service; because we use a similar liturgy for each service, it's easy to get into the habit of simply reciting the prayer of

confession by rote, so pausing to think more deeply about what we're actually saying here might be a helpful practice.

And thirdly, if we have experienced the grace of God in *our* lives, then we simply cannot keep this to ourselves. In our reading from his First Letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul speaks of his encounter with God's grace which completely transformed his life, from being a persecutor of the Church of God to being an apostle - one sent out to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ. His experience of God's grace in Christ in his *own* life compelled him to reach out to *others* with the great message of God's victory over evil through Christ's death and resurrection. The apostle Peter, too, was to become a faithful proclaimer of the Gospel, not through his own merits or virtues, but because he himself had experienced God's amazing grace in his own life. In the same way, it ought to be our desire for others to experience for themselves the mercy and grace of God which we ourselves have encountered.

So, when it comes to our country's many social problems, politicians are never going to find an entirely successful solution to them because they fail to recognise what lies at the *heart* of them, namely sin. By contrast, as Christians, we know what the ultimate solution really is - that all people need to recognise their sinfulness, to turn away from sin and to turn to the Lord. We have the diagnosis, but we also know the cure. So, what are *we* doing to help others find hope and salvation in Christ?

Like Peter, Isaiah and Paul, unworthy though we are, the Lord still calls us, not only to follow him, but to then go and be his witnesses in the world. God doesn't wait around for us to become perfectly holy people before he can use us for his service – after all, when it comes to growing in Christ-likeness, we're all 'works in progress'. God wants to use *us* – as those who know his forgiveness in our lives – to bear witness to his redeeming love in word and deed.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, we give you thanks and praise that through the sacrifice of your Son made once-for-all upon the Cross, we can know the forgiveness of our sins. May it be our desire for others to come to know the same mercy and grace which we have received from you. And help us to recognise that you are sovereign over *every* aspect of our lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.