

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C
(Feb. 8, 2004)

You have all noticed, I'm sure, the theme that links our three readings today: the idea of call or vocation. It's perhaps not just a coincidence, but a happy example of God's providence that February is a month when we pray for vocations to the priesthood and the religious life. Well, while we will indeed pray for vocations to the priesthood and the religious life, we must look now more closely at these readings and see what they say to all of us right now, which could, of course, include the possibility of a call to the priesthood or the religious life.

I guess I'll be saying what the readings mean to me and hope that that will be helpful to you as well.

What is most striking to me is that there is not just that common theme but there is also a common progression repeated in each of them. There is first an awareness of the presence of God, then the call itself, followed by a response and action. Four steps therefore: awareness of God, the call, a response, and action.

Isaiah is praying in the temple when he is suddenly aware of God's presence in a way not experienced before. It's awesome. Paul speaks of his call in the passage we heard from his First Letter to the Corinthians without describing the circumstances, but we know them from the Acts of the Apostles. Traveling to Damascus he sees a great light and is struck from his horse and he hears the voice of Jesus speaking to him. Peter, too, hears the voice of Jesus, but only after the miraculous catch of fish does he realize that he is in the presence of the holy just as much as Isaiah was in the temple.

The immediate response of all three is astonishment and fear, perhaps not unlike our own when we realize that the Lord is calling us. Woe is me, says Isaiah. Who are you, Lord? says Paul. And Simon: Depart from me.

Each one hears reassurance in a different way from God, from Jesus, but it all comes down to the same thing: don't be afraid. Don't be afraid. How often do we hear those words in the Gospels, especially the Gospel of Luke which we are reading this year. Don't be afraid to accept the challenge

that you hear from God because this same God who calls you will be with you no matter what.

And then: action. Here I am, send me, says Isaiah, and he goes out and preaches the words that God has put into his mouth, words that will get him into trouble. But once he has responded, once he has been touched by God, he cannot *not* speak, no matter what the consequences. Saul gets up from the ground and begins the process of conversion that will change him from a persecutor of Christians to the Apostle to the Gentiles. Simon and Andrew, James and John leave everything, Luke tells us, and follow Jesus.

Now all of this I am sure you knew or understood from hearing the readings. But here is an insight I came across recently that is of particular interest to us as a Jesuit parish. St. Ignatius formed a way of proceeding that is exactly like the pattern found in these passages: awareness of God's presence, the call, response and action. Doubtless he learned this from his own contemplation of scripture.

Awareness of God's presence: the idea of finding God in all things became the foundation of Ignatian spirituality. If someone were to ask me what is most characteristic of Ignatian spirituality I would say it is this: finding God in all things. Ignatius had no difficulty discerning God's presence. Everything in creation spoke to him of the creator. Everyone he met reflected the Lord, who said, "As long as you did it to one of these, you did it to me." We are told that he was often so overcome by the gift of tears during the celebration of Mass he could not continue. Even doing things not specifically religious, for instance in his studies, he sometimes had to make an effort not to be so fully aware of God's presence that it became a distraction and prevented him from doing what he was supposed to do.

Then hearing God's call. Ignatius was convinced, as are many spiritual writers, that God is always speaking to us at every moment, in all that we do. God is constantly trying to communicate with us. We are called every day, many, many times. Since that is true, that means that the call can come at unexpected moments, while we are doing the ordinary things that make up the web and woof of our lives. Isaiah was praying in the temple. Well, you might expect that to be a privileged place for God to speak to him. But Paul was on a journey to Damascus carrying out what for him was his ordinary business when he was knocked off his horse. And

Peter was washing his nets when Jesus got into his boat.

God certainly speaks to all of us while we are here in church, but God just assuredly speaks to us while we are washing our nets, or washing the dishes, as we teach or raise our children, as we prepare a brief for trial or examine a patient, as we repair a car or work at the computer. The call of God comes to us in the ordinariness of life. To many this may sound scandalous precisely because of its ordinariness. But God calls wherever people are to be found, and if that means during the plowing or bathing the sick or gathering roses, then that is where the call of God will be heard. Ignatius heard it while he was recuperating from a wound received in battle. At the same time this way of looking at reality – a very Ignatian way – sanctifies what might otherwise be thought merely ordinary. The Incarnation means that God took on human flesh and blood, human existence, human experience. And again, as Ignatius so well knew, that Incarnation implies that God uses ordinary people, places and things to reveal the extraordinariness of God. When we realize this we too will be able to cry out with Isaiah. “It is the Lord.”

We might be tempted to say, “Oh, but Isaiah and Paul and Peter had such extraordinary experiences. It was easy for them to recognize God’s presence.” It would be wrong to think that way. We must always remember when we read our Scripture just what it is the sacred writers are doing. The Seraphim singing, “Holy, holy, holy,” the temple filled with smoke, the blinding light that knocked Paul from his horse, the huge catch of fish – these are all metaphors for the experience of God’s powerful and overwhelming presence in the lives of these people, and that experience, dear friends, is possible for each and every one of us at any moment of our lives. Be careful. It may happen when we are all singing, “Holy, holy, holy,” in a few minutes, or when our church is filled with the smoke of incense. But it could just as easily happen when we are having coffee and a doughnut in McKenna Hall afterwards.

And then there is the final step: action. What we heard in today’s readings tells us how three people became aware of God’s overwhelming presence, of the Lord’s insistent call, and how they responded and moved into action. What about us? We are confronted by the massive challenges of life today and a culture that is often in opposition to the Gospel. It would

be only too easy for the homilist to resort to moralistic preaching and say, “Do this or don’t do that.” It’s too easy, too, to think we have done our duty when we have prayed for vocations to the priesthood and the religious life. It’s only after we have all become aware of the overwhelming presence and love of God, have listened closely and heard the Lord ask, “Whom shall I send?” that we can stand with Isaiah, with Paul and with Peter and say, “Here I am. Send me.”