

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time—Year C

February 10, 2019

You have probably heard the phrase “Shock and Awe”. The phrase is technically known as the doctrine of rapid dominance. It is a tactic based on the use of overwhelming power and spectacular displays of force to paralyze the enemy’s perception of the battlefield and destroy its will to fight (Wikipedia). Although ‘shock and awe’ is almost exclusively understood in a military context today, it is, in a sense, present in the scripture readings today. The recipients of the overwhelming visions and miraculous signs, as found in the three scripture readings, lead them, not so much to give up, but rather to recognize their sinfulness and, following that, their need for divine intervention.

In the Gospel of Luke proclaimed last Sunday, we heard Jesus affirm his role as messiah and prophet, fulfilled in the passage from Isaiah Chapter 61, as presented in the Synagogue in Nazareth. His fellow Nazoreans would not accept Jesus as a true prophet and Messiah, and even attempted to have him put to death for having made such a declaration. Undeterred, Jesus escapes from them and begins the work of gathering apostles around him, a close circle of 12 men who would share intimately in his earthly mission, beginning with Simon Peter.

But before exploring the original call of Simon Peter to be an apostle, let’s go back to the 1st Reading, the call of Isaiah to be a prophet. The liturgy brings these two passages together because there are common qualities between them.

Firstly, the young Isaiah receives a vision of God’s glory coming down upon the Temple in Jerusalem. God is surrounded by choirs of angels singing his praises. As the Hebrew language expressed superlatives by means of repetition, the word ‘Holy’ is expressed three times to imply ‘most holy’. This thrice repeated holy is employed in the Mass as the *Sanctus*, the proclamation which falls after the Preface and before the Eucharistic Prayer. The *Sanctus* reminds us that we, at the Mass, are joining with the angelic hosts in the praise and worship of God.

Overwhelmed by the vision of God, surrounded by divine praise and glory, Isaiah is certainly experiencing a ‘shock and awe’ moment. This moment, however, does not lead him to give up in the presence of a supreme power. Rather, it draws Isaiah to acknowledge his own sinfulness and that of his people. He understands

that his sin means that he is not up to the challenge that he is being called to, of being a prophet. This inadequacy, however, is purged away when one of the heavenly hosts touches Isaiah's lips with an ember taken from the Altar of Incense, which sanctifies him. With his sin and wickedness purged away, Isaiah is then ready to accept, through a vision, the invitation from the Lord to be a prophet.

One can discern three parts to Isaiah's call to be a prophet:

- 1). First, Isaiah contrasts his vision of God's glory with his own sinfulness, thus inadequacy to fulfil the prophetic vocation God is calling him to.
- 2). Secondly, this inadequacy is remedied by a divine intervention—his sins are purged away with an ember drawn from the Altar of Incense.
- 3). Thirdly, Isaiah, being cleansed of his sin, embraces the prophetic vocation given to him by God.

This three-point process will also be found in the Gospel readings account of Simon's call to be an apostle.

In the Second Reading, St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians describes his own 'shock and awe' encounter with the living God, adding his own testimony to hundreds of others who encountered the risen Christ. St. Paul testified to his vision of Christ twice before in the *Acts of the Apostles*. Like Isaiah, St. Paul's vision was a transformational experience. He went from being a persecutor of the Christian faith before his vision of Christ at the gates of Damascus, to be an ardent defender and evangelizer of the Christian faith after it. Like Isaiah, St. Paul acknowledged that he too was not up to the task set before him. Also, like Isaiah, St. Paul embraced his calling, becoming, in his case, an apostle to the gentiles.

Coming to the Gospel reading, one can find a similar dynamic as found in the First and Second Reading. Simon Peter had just completed a fruitless night of fishing, having nothing to show after a long laborious night. It may have stretched his patience to allow Jesus to use his boat as a podium that morning, from which he could teach the crowds on the shoreline. Simon allows for it, showing some receptivity to Jesus and his teachings. Jesus, however, was pressing his luck when he told Peter to "put out into the deep water and let down your net for a catch". Simon Peter knew this to be a futile act. He fished at night because he knew the

fish came up to the surface of the lake at night, where they could be easily caught with a net. In the day, however, went back down to the deep part of the lake, out of reach of the fishermen's nets. Again, Simon Peter shows his receptiveness to Jesus' instructions and lets down his net, even though it defied all long-held fishing practices. When he did this, however, he experienced his own 'shock and awe' moment. He hauled in such a huge number of fishes, that he had to call in his partners for assistance. Jesus knew that if he wanted to get a fisherman's attention, enable him to find fish at a time and place where they were not supposed to be!

Simon Peter realizes that he has just had a miraculous encounter with the living God and, like Isaiah and St. Paul, can only respond by acknowledging his own sinfulness. He too, like Isaiah and St. Paul, is not left in impotent inadequacy. Rather, he is given a vocation: become, like James and John, an apostle and get engaged in fishing of a far more important kind. Jesus invites Simon Peter, despite his sin, to become a fisher of people by means of evangelization.

The circumstances surrounding Isaiah's, St. Paul's and St. Simon Peter's call to ministry illustrates one stark fact: one's personal sin and, from that, sense of inadequacy to meet's one's call is not an excuse to reject the call to ministry and evangelization. This fact is as equally true for us as it was for Isaiah, St. Paul and St. Simon Peter.

The Scripture Scholar John Bergsma put it this way: "The Message of the Gospel for us today can be summed up in the Latin phrase so beloved by Pope John Paul II "Duc in Altum" [Latin for] "put out into the deep". This is Jesus' command for Peter and it remains his will for the whole Church. Yes, we are facing a hostile culture. Yes, there are "bad fish" out there. Yes, we have been laboring for years "in the night" and don't seem to have gotten anywhere. None of that can prevent the Lord from delivering an abundant catch. But if we fail to rise to this challenge, and disobey the command to sail into deep water, it won't happen. Pope Francis is emphatically calling on Catholics to take risks in order to go into the "deep water" and spread the Gospel. Let's heed his call and go fishing."