

Epiphany 5, Feb. 6, 2022

(Isaiah 6:1-8 – Luke 5:1-11)

The Prophet Isaiah of Jerusalem was no stranger to the Temple, but one day he enters and beholds the glory of God. You heard the passage read – Isaiah sees only the hem of God's robe but the glory and radiance of God almost consumes him. There is energy, activity, voices and song - Isaiah knows he should not behold this – he is a man of unclean lips who lives among a people who say the right words but do not mean them.

Yet his voice is heard – the Seraph brings the burning coal, touches his lips, the Prophet is forgiven and able to answer God's question – Who will go for me?

Here am I, send me.

I have read this passage many times and it still gives me a shiver.

The Epiphany of God, for Isaiah, is pure light, glory, inducing awe. You cling to that vision of God and do not rely on your own wisdom.

Yet, Isaiah would spend his life trying to convince the rulers of Israel not to rely on their own wisdom as they confronted the power of Assyria but to rely on the will and protection of God.

The rulers did not listen – and the northern kingdom was conquered by Assyria in 722 BC.

God was never comfortable with Israel as a Kingdom. Long before, it was Samuel on behalf of Israel's leaders, who pleaded with God to give them a King – to be like other nations. (1 Samuel 8)

God finally relented but with a warning – Israel is rejecting God as their leader in order to have a King. Kings will lead you only into trouble.

Thus, Isaiah – gifted, faithful, diligent – and with a vision of God’s hope for Israel, met with virtually no success at all.

And you can say much the same for Jeremiah, Ezekiel – indeed all the prophets of Israel. If God is with us, thought the leaders, then surely our cause will triumph. Except it didn’t.

It is fascinating, then, to see Jesus begin his ministry in the somewhat remote area of Galilee. Because of the Assyrian wars and the ways the Assyrians exchanged captured populations, the Galileans were not considered pure in blood and lineage.

As Nathaniel said, can anything good come out of Nazareth? – he might have added the whole region.

So today we find Jesus not in the houses of the rich and famous, but out by the lakeshore, speaking and healing and thinking about some help.

I don’t need to repeat the story, but it is fascinating what happened. A tired and frustrated Peter lent Jesus his boat for Jesus to address the crowds; then gave in and moved his boat further into the sea to let down his nets - even though it was a lost cause.

Except . . . except suddenly there were enough fish to almost sink 2 boats.

Like Isaiah, Peter knew he was on holy ground – “go away Lord. I am not worthy”. Jesus ignores these words and calls Peter to come and catch people – almost sounds like fun.

We will see in weeks to come that much of Jesus' ministry was among those whom the leaders of Temple and State considered to be of no particular value.

Of course, Temple and State were not amused with Jesus' success and would conspire to have Jesus killed.

This week I was speaking to a close friend who left formal ministry to work with women who suffer from abuse and domestic violence. She is a very creative person and in her spare time, started tracing her roots which go way back into early years in Scotland. Now she is exploring Celtic spirituality.

Her point was that Christianity came to Scotland and Ireland before the Church of the Empire under the Romans. Once that Church arrived, it served the state and oppressed and tried to eradicate all considered to be pagan.

It reminded me of Canada where there are documented instances of early missionaries learning the ways of First Nations peoples and joining Christianity to ancient rites.

The Church of Empire, of course, disallowed such nonsense.

The same thing happened in Africa and South America and Asia. The Church under the power of the State, tried to eradicate all that was not orthodox.

The care for earth and water, forest and game, sacred places – all leveled and forgotten.

The Nobel Prize winning Nigerian author, Chinua Achebe, (*Things Fall Apart*) argued in several works that the missionaries were really the agents of the Great White Queen (Victoria) and that is how Christianity triumphed.

I am not saying that Christianity should absorb any old practice because some were harmful and cruel. But I am saying that faith is often flattened by the power of Empire.

We see it in China and other dictatorships where religion, if allowed, must serve the state.

We are also under the Empire of Human Hubris – thinking our technology and innovation will save us.

God is pushed further and further away. Who needs God when we will soon have heaven on earth? – or, if not, go to another planet. But it is just not working.

The question today, then, is “what is God calling us to do, to be?”

As Jesus stands before us, calling us, what is our task, where do we go?

First, I believe we need to regain our sense of the Holy.

That can be through spiritual practice, through prayer, through being gentle with life in all its forms.

Letting ourselves be dependent – needing others – being still and knowing God is near.

Seeking silence – not easy - and allowing God’s voice to be heard.

Second, we need to remember Jesus is calling us. Where, how – questions we need to consider. There were deep waters Peter had not explored – so with us – as we listen to the Spirit so we learn to trust again, be curious again. To look deeper.

The early Church survived in part because men and women fled the cities to live in the caves and catacombs – living ascetic lives – refusing to give in to empire. When they returned to the towns, they brought renewal and hope.

So with Luther and Calvin and the Reformers – called to free the Church from, at that time, a Papal Empire.

I cannot write a prescription but don't need to.

Jesus spoke it long ago, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

Indeed it is an awesome thought that in this time and in this place, in Church or down by the seashore, Jesus calls us to be light in our world.

Amen