

[Readings: Isaiah 6:1-2, 3-8; Psalm 138; 1 Cor. 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11]

Ask a group of people to name a biblical prophet, and the most common answer will likely be Isaiah. Isaiah owes his popularity to having been a writing prophet (unlike Elijah and Elisha, who left their legacy in the hands of storytellers), and to having been darn good at his craft. He is the prophet most quoted and set to music, and most of us can probably recite something he wrote: "Comfort, comfort O my people," "They shall beat their swords into ploughshares," "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light," "For unto us a child is born," "In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord" --just for starters. Even Jesus quoted Isaiah: "For my house shall be a house of prayer." If you want an Old Testament prophecy, Isaiah is the go-to guy.

But read Isaiah when he speaks about himself, and you get a different sense of the man: "Woe is me, I am doomed! For I am a man of unclean lips," he declares. It takes a burning coal from heaven applied to his mouth to remove his wickedness. Pardon me, but if Isaiah had to have HIS mouth washed out with fire, what chance do you and I have?

Then there's Paul of Tarsus, the apostle to the Gentiles, the man who wrote the lion's share of the New Testament and laid the foundation for the church's self-understanding for these many centuries. He also famously suffered imprisonment, stoning, shipwreck, and eventual beheading for his faith. What place does Paul claim in the eternal scheme of things? "I am the least of the apostles, not fit to be called an apostle." If Paul is unfit to be sent by God, then you and I probably shouldn't even volunteer.

Look at Simon Peter, one of the Lord's best friends, appointed to wield the keys of the Kingdom, and given the chair of apostolic succession. He was the clear leader of the 12 apostles and would remain at the head of the Church through its first generation. His successors would continue to govern the Church under his name. Peter, too, would face martyrdom by crucifixion, proving Jesus' teaching that no servant is greater than the master.

What does Peter have to say about his worthiness? “Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man,” he says, on his knees. So there’s the tally of three of the most prominent names in the Bible: a doomed and unclean man, one unfit to serve, and a sinner uncomfortable to be in the Lord’s presence. Not a worthy fellow among them!

None of this should lead us to despair of our chances to be a prophet, servant, or leader for that matter. It merely suggests that the idea of worthiness is something we should relegate to the mothballs. If we think being good will make us worthy before God, we are fooling ourselves big-time. If we think bankrolling extra prayers, being generous to charities, or even laying down our lives will mean that God owes us a place in Heaven, we’ve got it all very wrong.

The key to the issue is in the centurion’s words that we pray a version of at every Mass. According to the story, the centurion has a dying slave most dear to him, and those around Jesus urge him to assist this Roman because, as they say, “He deserves to have you do this for him, for he loves our nation and he built a synagogue for us.” In other words, here is a man surely worthy of a miracle. Yet the humble centurion sends word to Jesus from a distance: “Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you enter under my roof. Therefore, I did not consider myself worthy to come to you; but say the word and let my servant be healed.”

Jesus marvels at his faith. Jesus doesn’t marvel at anyone else’s faith in all four gospels, so this is noteworthy. And the man’s servant is healed as he requested. It is for this, then, that we pray at each Mass: not to be made worthy, because that is beyond us, but simply to be healed; or as we used to say, that our souls would be healed.

Worthiness is an attribute of God. But God can bestow on us the grace to stand without fear in the divine presence because God’s mercy makes up for any shortfall on our part. God’s angel purged Isaiah’s lips so that he could pour out the wealth of beautiful words ascribed to him.

And Paul admits that, “By the grace of God, I am what I am, and God’s grace to me has not been ineffective.” One of my favorite New Testament quotes. I say it in the positive: “God’s grace to me has been effective.”

Peter is indeed a sinful man, but Jesus tells him not to be afraid of his insufficiency. Nor should we be afraid or reluctant to come forward all the way to the Lord’s Table, because God’s grace is always greater than our faults, and it’s all we need.

The call of God in our lives is at once a call to the most profound and to the most practical. Though the invitation of God is to give our whole selves, the manner of our response is typically focused on small, specific actions -- right where we live. To what in my life do I need to say, “Here I am, Lord”?

To the child who’s having a rough time in school or with friends, and could use loving attention?

To the lonely neighbor who could use a kind friend to listen patiently to the details of his or her life?

To letting go an old resentment that is poisoning my heart?

To the challenge of forgiving someone who hurt me; or to the task of apologizing to someone I have hurt?

To a distant relative who would love to get a cheery letter, card, or e-mail?

To a situation I’ve been procrastinating about that needs me to be strong and courageous?

To the inner voice of creativity that feels stifled?

To a recurring habit of sin that I need to bring into the light of God’s love?

Like Isaiah, Paul, and Peter, we all feel unworthy to the task God calls us to. But we are not alone. With God’s help, we can do whatever we are called to do. Be not afraid. AMEN!