

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle C

Isaiah 6:1-2A, 3-8

Psalm 138:1-2, 2-3, 4-5, 7-8

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Luke 5:1-11

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When I was a young man, back in the 1970s, a lot of folk music was written for use in the Mass. Some of it was quite good. Some of it wasn't. My least favorite piece of liturgical music from this era was a setting of the "Holy, Holy, Holy" composed in a style I can only characterize as "California mellow." I won't try to sing it for you, but the melody was similar to "The Girl from Ipanema." When I heard this piece of music, it made me think of a loose reed saxophone being played in a cocktail lounge, to the accompaniment of ice cubes rattling in glasses. Or I thought of a white sandy beach being caressed by gentle California surf, while sea gulls called out to one another - in key.

Clearly the composer badly missed the mood of our first reading today in which blazing figures are calling out to one another in awestruck voices: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. All the earth is full of his glory!" Their words make the earth quake. The temple shakes on its foundations, and the entire room fills with smoke. Isaiah finds his voice, and moans, "Woe is me, I am doomed! For I am a man of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts!"

This is not an account of a friendly, relaxed encounter of a man with a benign, harmless God. Rather, this is a human being deeply aware of his inadequacy and weakness, trembling in the presence of the unmitigated, undisguised, sovereign power of God. It is not the moment

to play "The Girl from Ipanema."

The symbolism of religion is similar to the symbolism of government. The early basilicas, for example, were modeled upon the ancient Roman law courts. And in our reading from Isaiah, God is portrayed as a fearsome oriental monarch.

Ordinary people appearing before thrones tend to grovel, out of an instinct for self-preservation. They say things like, "Might this worthless servant make bold to utter a word in your gracious majesty's ear?" In the U.K., real political power rests with Parliament, and the stylized, highly deferential language used on state occasions in reference to the Queen, is really a courtesy -- an elegant custom. But, of course, it wasn't always that way. People don't quake in fear for their lives before Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. But an appearance before Queen Elizabeth I was doubtless an altogether different experience.

This point was brought home to me when I was living in East Africa. I noticed that the language politicians and others used in reference to the president, was very like the language used in Europe in the presence of royalty. But in East Africa, potentates tended to be really potent, and the language was used not out of courtesy, but because of the awareness that one's fortunes and even one's continued existence might depend on the whim of the ruler.

On a divine scale, this may be the experience that terrified Isaiah in the temple, blinded Paul on the road to Damascus, and brought Peter to his knees before Jesus. It is a sudden, accurate estimation of one's own stature and status, compared to those of the person before whom one stands. It's an encounter with God's *holiness* -- that is the separateness, the apartness of God. God is *other* than we are, and this otherness, as

our readings testify, can inspire feelings of unworthiness and a kind of fear.

There has to be an element of otherness in our Christian understanding of God, for a God whom there could *never* be an occasion to fear, a *safe* God, a *tame* God, would be a contradiction in terms. Of course, this is only one side of our understanding of God. The other side is the immanent God -- the God who is close to me -- who is present *in* me. We read of this side of God in the intimate sensuous imagery of the mystics. But the immanent God can't be the whole story, for as Chesterton wrote, "That Jones shall worship the God within him, ultimately turns out to mean that Jones shall worship Jones."

God is both within us and over against us. In approaching God, we should be simultaneously aware of incredible closeness, and infinite distance. God doesn't want us to be frightened. Jesus' first words to the kneeling Peter are, "Do not be afraid." If we look for common threads in all three readings, we discover that God wants to inspire, not terror, but conversion. And after conversion, there follows a life of service. Isaiah becomes a prophet, Paul becomes the "hardest worker" among the apostles, Simon Peter becomes a fisher of men and women.

God becomes present to us in many ways -- in the Eucharist, in the poor, in Scripture, in the community. An awareness of God's holiness, God's otherness, God's majesty, can only heighten our appreciation of the precious gift we are offered when God in Christ, offers us himself. At Mass on Sunday, we will make our own, the words of the seraphim in Isaiah: "Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of hosts." When we say the words, perhaps we will feel some of the awe and reverence they were intended to convey.

