

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

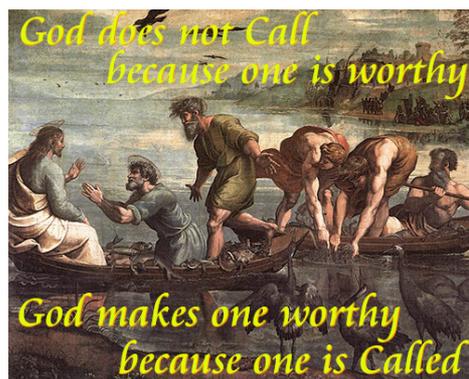
After he had finished speaking to the crowds from Simon's boat, Jesus said to Simon: "Put out into deep water and lower your nets for a catch...Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men."

This coming Sunday's readings focus on the topic of vocation. The word itself is derived from the Latin *vocare*, meaning to call. Yet not too many of us have heard a voice calling us to the vocation we are currently living. We all have a vocation in life, and we were all blessed with the ability to discern and choose the path in life which we believe is the best fit for us, which we are convinced is the most authentic way of expressing the love in our heart, of being our true self.

Pursuing one's vocation in life involves a succession of choices. We Christians believe that, in making those choices, we have available to us the guidance of God's Spirit, who is constantly present to us, acting through our thoughts and feelings, through other people and through the created world around us. But we have to be prepared to open ourselves to the promptings of God's Spirit who works through the ordinary events of our lives. Ultimately, however, it is left to us to choose the path in life we believe is most appropriate for us, even though we seek the guidance of God's Spirit in making our choice and living it out day after day as it unfolds, sometimes in surprising ways. Still, the metaphor of vocation as call, with its deep foundation in Scripture and tradition, persists in influencing the way we understand and talk about the life choices we make.

Closely associated with the reality of vocation is the phenomenon we call "a religious experience". Simply put, a religious experience is a conscious encounter with the divine. Many ordinary and not-so-ordinary people tell of such encounters in their lives. Normally, those occasions are infrequent. Some of those encounters are recorded in the Bible, and are generally described in terms of verbal exchanges, hearing a voice of invitation or a call. Sometimes they are described as dreams. Joseph, the foster father of Jesus, had several such dreams. Additionally, such encounters are often followed immediately by protests of unworthiness or not being fit or ready for the job, offered by those who have just heard the "call". Moses, Jeremiah and Jonah fit into that category.

This Sunday's first reading, which describes the call of Isaiah, contains all these features. The context of Isaiah's religious experience is worthy of note. He lived at a time when the affairs of Israel were guided by King Uzziah, a good, wise and benevolent ruler who had come to the throne at the age of six and grew up to lead his people for more than fifty years. He had the foresight to strengthen the fortifications of Jerusalem to protect his people from invading armies. He also promoted agriculture as a practical way of providing food for the people, and had the common good as his principal focus. Eventually, however, he was stricken with leprosy and died. Isaiah came from a wealthy and highly respected family, all of whom were well connected with King Uzziah and his court. At the news of the king's death, Isaiah went to the Temple to join all the people in prayer, as they expressed their grief. And it was there that he had a religious experience, in which he heard God inviting him to leave his comfortable life-style and devote himself to being God's messenger to the people of Israel. Instinctively, his response was: "I'm not good enough. I have a history of criticizing others, of speaking nastily about them." But God did not back off. The



storyteller uses the symbol of Isaiah's critical lips being purified by an angel carrying a burning coal from the altar of incense, situated in the Temple. Then God said: "If not you, Isaiah, who will undertake this job for me?" Then, to his own amazement, Isaiah heard himself saying: "Here I am, Lord; send me!" Whatever exactly happened for Isaiah in the Temple that day was so overwhelming that he sensed that God was not only in the Temple but everywhere: "All the earth is filled with God's glory" (Isaiah 6, 3).

In the gospel reading, we hear Peter respond in similar fashion. His experience of fishing had taught him that big catches are very rare in the heat of the day. He had not long finished doing what all professional fishermen do - trawl during the night hours. Reluctantly, he humoured Jesus by dropping his nets in the middle of the day. When the unexpected happened and he netted more fish than he could cope with, he realized that he was in the presence of holiness, and not worthy to be there. His response was: "Please, Jesus, have nothing to do with me. I'm weak, fragile and sinful." Jesus ignored his plea, told him not to be afraid, and gave him the even more difficult task of "catching people". He extended the same invitation to Simon Peter's fishing partners, James and John. And almost incredibly, all three accepted the invitation on the spot.

In the second reading of this Sunday, Paul makes only a passing reference to how an encounter with Jesus turned his life upside down: "Last of all, as to one born abnormally, he appeared to me. For I am the least of the apostles, not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God" (1 Corinthians 15, 7-9). There are full accounts in *Acts*, chapters 9 and 22. But whatever happened on that road to Damascus changed his heart.

There is something the same and something different about the accounts of the faith journeys of these three Biblical giants. Their stories serve to highlight how every person's faith journey is unique. God's Spirit touches us in the particular circumstances of our particular lives. We can all look at our lives in retrospect and point to events and people who made a very significant impact on us. Our encounters with them led us to reflect on how we wanted to live our lives. It was through them that God's Spirit was at work. But we had to choose whether or not we would respond and what shape our response would take. Moreover, every day we continue to make decisions that confirm and nourish that very first risky, yet courageous, decision we made to embrace the way of life we believed would be an authentic expression of ourselves, our gifts and the love in our heart. There have also been times when we have made decisions that have been less than authentic and nourishing. But with God's help we dust ourselves off and readjust our compass.

What's more, we discover that these decisions about choosing our vocation in life are not in step with the calendar. Nor are they made in accord with some rigid, lock-step process. They are influenced by our personality, our insights, our skill (or lack of it) in discerning, our courage, determination and flexibility, and any number of other factors and circumstances. Our experience also tells us that we don't all grow, flourish and find our true fit at the same rate. But there is one constant, and that is a recognition that life demands change. By definition, to grow is to change, and the prospect of change sometimes frightens us, even paralyzes us temporarily. But failure or unwillingness to change leads to atrophy and death. And we have all met people who are dead but not yet buried. Let's hope and pray that we don't meet such people when we look into the mirror. And let's never lose sight of the dream Jesus has for us: "I have come that they may have life and have it in abundance" (John 10, 10). Are we brave enough to choose life?