

Homily for February 4, 2001
5th Sunday in Ordinary Time Cycle C

By Father Charles Bowes

Isaiah 6:1-2a, 3-8
1 Corinthians 15:1-11
Luke 5:1-11

It's the experience of God's love for us even when we are broken that enables us to follow him.

St. Luke's gospel chapter 5 presents a unique way of becoming a follower of Jesus – a way that differs from the gospels of St. Matthew and St. Mark. In those gospels, Jesus calls disciples and they follow him. But in St. Luke's gospel Simon and others first experience the holy, experience the miraculous catch of fish, and then, so aware of their brokenness, yet swallowed up in hope, they follow Jesus. Experience God first; experience God's love right where we're hurt, broken or sinful; then we just naturally follow and live the life of Jesus and of a disciple. The energy comes from the forgiveness and acceptance given by God.

The same thing happens in our first reading, Isaiah chapter 6, wherein Isaiah experiences this extraordinary vision of the Holy One in the temple and responds simply, "I am a man of unclean lips amid people of the same ilk – here I am, send me!" And in our second reading, 1st Corinthians chapter 15, St. Paul gets knocked off his horse and from that experience of the Holy One, admits "I persecuted the Church of God," feels blessed and loved, and becomes a proclaimer of what he once persecuted.

This weekend is Scout Sunday, and one in which we welcome yet more people into the catechumenate. Both of these celebrations have the same theme in common – somehow people experience a loving God right where they

need to and because of that experience are empowered to do godly things, good things.

At the Mass last year honoring a number of our scouts, I quoted a highly complimentary letter from a hiker who had encountered our Troop 400 during an outing in the state of Maine in 1999. She makes mention of how her initial dread of making an eight-hour hike accompanied by noisy, rambunctious youth was transformed by the encounter into what became a truly pleasant experience of meeting, as she describes it, "a group made up of polite, good-natured, and mature scouts, and caring, exemplary leaders." What I think is of special significance is how the letter concludes because it is almost a jumping-off point for an encounter with the holy and a transformation of a person's life. It reads this way: "I think it's important for you to know something about the writer of a letter such as this. I'm a twenty-nine-year-old middle and high school teacher. I am not a mother or grandmother who is feeling sentimental. I am simply a person, who thanks to a particular troop, was given the opportunity to appreciate and respect Boy Scouting." Here was someone who was able to reflect upon her initial prejudice and find in the encounter with some genuinely good folks the capacity to move beyond that into something altogether new – esteem for an institution – perhaps even an openness to the holy in a new way.

Or again, in our rite of welcome of folks into the catechumenate – they are asked two questions that the Sponsors answer based upon prior conversations. "What do you ask of God and what do you ask of us the Church?"

Somehow it is in the meeting of people, some outreach, some touch, some encounter that was in some way transforming, these folks met God, the Holy One – enfleshed. This encounter enabled them then to reaffirm their embrace of the cross or to make that cross their own for the very first time, and likewise to embrace the book, the gospel, the message handed on for centuries. As in Luke's gospel, the disciples follow Jesus after experiencing God's power, love and forgiveness and are empowered to turn their lives around, in some cases, even leaving everything to follow him. This provides the whole pattern for the early Church from Pentecost on, when the gifts of the Spirit fill people with power, enable them to rejoice even amid persecution and move the Church outward to different peoples. When we see young folks in scout uniforms coming together into church to celebrate their God in what they do and represent; when we see catechumens and candidates for full communion embrace the cross and book in our midst – in both instances our faith is renewed and our God somehow intervenes anew so that all of us are the better for what we celebrate today.

There is a story from the Middle Ages about a young woman who was expelled from heaven. As she left, she was told that if she would bring back the gift that is most valued by God, she would be welcomed back. She brought back drops of blood from a dying patriot. She brought back some coins that a destitute widow had given to the poor. She brought back a remnant of a Bible that had been used for years by an eminent preacher. She brought back some dust from the shoes of a missionary laboring in a remote wasteland. She brought back many similar things but was turned back repeatedly.

One day she saw a small boy playing by a fountain. A man rode up on horseback and dismounted to take a drink. The man saw the child and suddenly remembered his boyhood innocence. Then, looking in the fountain and seeing the reflection of his hardened face, he realized what he had done with his life. Tears of repentance welled up in his eyes and began to trickle down his cheeks. The young woman

took one of these tears back to heaven and was received with joy and love.

Contemporary scouting has a wide range of merit badges and programs available for folks to tie them into their religious practices, their faith practices. Whether Buddhist or Hindu, Catholic, Protestant or Jew – religious faith and the life of service go hand in hand. This year we wish to honor a number of our Girl Scouts who have been working on the Marian medal, a program unique to the Catholic Church, which presents an opportunity to develop new insights into one's self, friends, parents and the world around us. The outcome from this program is a deepened spirit of hope and faith, modeled upon Virgin Mary, the ideal Christian and follower of Jesus, as an example of the Church serving our brothers and sisters in the spirit of that same Jesus. Now I'll first ask the consultants for the program – Mrs. Zettler and Mrs. Dauer – please to stand and as I call the names of each of the girls, I invite them to stand in their places and face the assembly: Andrea Zettler, Lauren Myerly, Amanda Knollman, Angela Kock, Elizabeth Williams, Chelsy Ahlers, Sandra Blum and Allison Hutchinson – and let us acclaim their good work: “Christ will be your light, learn to know and follow Him.”

I invite the Church to extend your hands towards these young people as we invoke God's blessing upon them and give thanks for the manifestation of his love and good work through their hands and the hands of all in the program of scouting, which so greatly blesses our parish and obviously blesses the lives of those they touch: God, source of strength and life, from your hands through our families and leaders, we have received our Catholic faith and the spirit of Jesus to share that faith and so to serve those whose lives we touch. We bless and praise your name for the gift of these young people, for the fellowship of scouting and for the good you have entrusted into their hands. Continue to pour out your gifts upon them that their efforts and the name of your Son may bring humankind closer to unity and peace. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.