

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time
February 8, 2004

By Father Charles Bowes

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

*We're apt to think Christianity is all about pleasing God,
when all the while it's about God trying to please us back.*

When we are confronted by the new and the overwhelming, we, together with Saint Peter, are apt to say to God, "Depart from me, for I am sinful." But Christianity is not for the holy any more than a hospital is for the healthy. We cannot "fix" ourselves and then go to God. If we try to wait until we are good Christians before we develop our relationship with God in Christ Jesus, we will never do either.

According to Luke 5, Simon already had a job when he met Jesus. He wasn't doing well at it; people in his day who depended on fishing for a livelihood and people who rely on it now have no control over the availability of the product. On a day when the fish weren't biting, there was nothing to do but sit around on the beach mending nets and complaining about the economy. Simon was under employed.

Paul, on the other hand, was over employed when he met the risen Jesus on that famous journey. He was busy - no time to think, no chance to evaluate his actions. Night and day he was caught up in the demands of a growing business, one that kept him going beyond the limits of endurance because he was so sure of the rightness of his efforts.

Isaiah may well have been the sort of son who

drives his parents mad. He was a daydreamer with no clear career objectives, and worse still, he wrote poetry. At least he liked to hang out at the temple; surely he would stay out of trouble there.

All three figures in today's readings had too much on their minds to be bothered with the question of vocation, the question of, "What am I to do in life?" Simon and Paul were simply doing what had to be done; Isaiah was wrapped up in a world of his own. It took something extraordinary to catch their attention.

Jesus joins the fishing expedition, and Simon becomes weak in the knees. Paul hears Jesus rebuking him in the midst of a flashing light, and no longer sees what he saw before. Isaiah hears the voice of the Lord, and the whole earth trembles. All three react first by expressing their own unworthiness, and then by turning their lives around and never looking back.

These Sundays emphasize God's appearances at Jesus' birth and baptism, sometimes viewing them as unrelated to the way we go about our business. These three stories remind us that God can come close in the middle of workdays to people who are not looking for anything different and who may not welcome the interruption. They show us that God drawing near to us has to do with choices we make to live our lives, that the uncovering of God's character before our very eyes confronts us and turns us around.

Such confrontation makes it impossible to resist our call, even when it means suffering, wrenching change and new identity.

With Simon we are astounded; we can no longer pull fish out of the water to die...we are called to pull people out of the water to live. Like Paul and Isaiah, we retell the story of this occurrence in our lives to validate our new identity, to prove to those around us that we have been changed and that our alien way of behaving is both obedience and freedom. In sacred places, where we work or on the road, meeting God demands change. Simon Peter felt totally inadequate, but with the calling comes power. Even in an old fishing boat, Jesus has the power to turn emptiness to fullness. His promise to Simon was to make something new and life-giving out of him as well.

We're apt to think Christianity is all about pleasing God, when all the while it's about God trying to please us back.