

Sermon Notes for Trinity V

“Depart from me, for I am a sinful man” (Gospel)

This is one of two quite common reactions to God's power.

We had better remember the other reaction, that of Simon Magus in Acts - here is power and I want to buy it. This is an evil which is still with us; there are still some would-be clerics who want to get the power and status of a priest or preferably bishop quickly. Fortunately in our body they generally lose interest when told that ministry is with us always and only a humble service to the brethren (Mark 10:45); we have nothing else to offer and, thank God, nothing at all to sell.

But is Simon Peter much wiser? He sees God's power at work and feels threatened. Much more of this and I will be caught! How can I escape? Sin is a wonderful excuse - so humble! (Especially as people like the Pharisees tended to use “sinner” to mean little more than somebody who didn't adopt their extensions of the Old Testament obligations. At least, that is how the argument is presented in the gospels. Loyalty to God does not lie in multiplying laws but in grasping what he wants.) The implied argument is “don't come near me or I might spoil your holiness”; the implicit fear is “if you come near me, I might catch your holiness and be obliged to a new and hard way of life I don't want to accept”. (You might look at Haggai 2.10-14. for this issue of contagious uncleanness and holiness. It is not just a virus that can be caught.)

“I am a sinful man.” How is Christ to answer? Certainly not “you are all right really, don't worry”. That may be the modern world and church; it is not the Lord. More nearly appropriate is “my business is with sinners, not with the righteous” (Mark 2.17) so knowing you are a sinner is a qualification, not a disqualification. (Compare the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19 - whose trade was thought to make him a sinner by definition.) But the actual answer given is “fear not, from henceforth thou shalt catch men”. The logic is, “I have already caught you”.

We don't have the choice; once we have seen that the Lord wants us, we have to come to terms with (or of course reject) the “love that will not let me go”. The Lord wants us, and, I suppose, if we didn't already after a fashion know and accept that, we wouldn't be studying this text at all.

Is this good news? What have we heard?

We are sinners.

It does matter.

Christ wants us.

But on his terms, not any we might try to offer him!

And for Peter those terms were mission (and so widespread rejection), leadership (but without prestige) and martyrdom (in the end). Hardly pleasant.

For us? there is no simple answer. Yes, Christ does call us, now and ever, to “lead a new life, following the commandments of God and walking from henceforth in his holy ways”. That may not be to change our vocation; it may not outwardly be very “religious”. Christ does not call most of us, and I don't believe he called me, to be professional (paid, full-time) clergy. I wonder, in the difficult times he has now given us, whether he wants large numbers of aggressive missionaries in this country, though I am sure we must all be able to give some explanation of why we follow him when we are asked. He does call all of us to make a good job of the rest of our lives.

“Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws, makes that and th'action fine.” Maybe the Lord seems to ask little of us but household chores. Yet the room ought to end up “fine”; and to put our whole selves into the task because Christ wants that of us is to make the task itself finely discharged and his laws respected.