

Have you ever wondered how the Church chooses the readings we hear each Sunday? There is a rationale behind the choice of readings we hear on Sundays. As you probably already know, there is a three year cycle in which we focus on one of the three synoptic Gospels for the whole liturgical year: Matthew, Mark or Luke. This year we are reading from the Gospel of Luke. But there are other principles that determine how we read the Gospel. During Ordinary Time the Church follows the principle of *lectio continua* or continual reading. That is, we start at the beginning of the Gospel for the year and work our way through it, following the major events in the life of Christ. But the principles also determine what we read with the Gospel. During Ordinary Time the 1<sup>st</sup> reading from the Old Testament is chosen following the principle of *harmony*, that is, there is a connection between the Old Testament reading and the Gospel, usually based on typology. The 2<sup>nd</sup> reading, which is taken from the Epistles, also follow its own principle of *lectio continua*, reading in order, but is not intentionally related to the Gospel.

This week's readings clearly demonstrate the principle of *harmony* between the Old Testament reading and the Gospel. The 1<sup>st</sup> reading from the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Prophet Isaiah tells of God's call to Isaiah to become his ambassador to Israel. The Gospel from Luke tells of Jesus' call to Simon to become his disciple. But the harmony between these two readings goes much deeper than this similarity. The story of Isaiah's summons provides a framework for a deeper understanding of Simon's experience.

When we look closely we can see four stages in God's call to Isaiah.

Isaiah is praying in the temple and he is granted a vision of God. He experiences the visible presence of God in all his majesty, holiness and glory. Angels singing holy, holy, holy; the place shakes and is filled with smoke. This sort of experience of God only happens a few times in the Old Testament. Moses and Ezekiel had similar experiences of the visible presence of God.

Through this vision, Isaiah gains a new awareness of human pettiness and sinfulness, and the enormous abyss between God's holiness and man's sin. Such an experience of God changes a person, it changed Isaiah. In the light of God's presence he became frightfully aware of his own sinfulness and the sinfulness of his people. He thought himself doomed because of it.

But God does what God always does, he pours out his Grace and Mercy. He forgives Isaiah and purges him of his sins. The angel purifies Isaiah's lips with a hot coal preparing Isaiah to accept God's mission to speak for him.

This is what God does when we encounter him, he always gives a mission. Isaiah is called to speak for God, that's what the title prophet means, "*one who speaks for God*". Isaiah, now ready to accept the mission, responds, "*Here I am, send me!*".

These are the four stages in the divine summons of Isaiah: God's visible presence, realization of sinfulness, forgiveness and mission.

With this in mind, we can reflect on Simon's experience on the Sea of Galilee. Simon already knew Jesus and had experienced his extraordinary abilities at the healing of Simon's mother-in-law. That explains why he does not object when this carpenter climbs into his boat and starts telling him how to fish. When Simon reluctantly responds to Jesus' request to put out into deep water and lower his nets, he refers to him as "*master*". He recognizes Jesus as a person of authority and is willing to do what he commands. But after the great catch Simon refers to Jesus as "*Lord*", the title given to Jesus after his Resurrection. Because of the miraculous catch of fish, Simon realizes that he is in the presence of something supernatural, and he has just experienced the power of God. Like Isaiah his world has just been shaken.

Simon's response is the same as Isaiah's. He recognizes his unworthiness in relationship to Jesus. He becomes acutely aware of his sinfulness, "*Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man*".

But as with Isaiah, God's Grace of forgiveness is poured out on Simon when Jesus says, "*Do not be afraid*". Jesus accepts Simon as he is, his weaknesses, inadequacies and sinfulness.

Jesus has a mission for Simon and his companions. He calls them to become his disciples and to follow him so they can bring the Good News to the world. Like Isaiah, their experience moves them to accept the mission, for *they left everything and followed him*.

These are the same four stages we saw in Isaiah: God's visible presence, realization of sinfulness, forgiveness and mission.

What does all this teach us today? How do we apply the teaching of these readings in our own lives. The most obvious lesson is: we are all called by God to serve. Our sinfulness does not need to be an obstacle, for we can all be forgiven when we acknowledge our sins. But in both these episodes we see two other themes emerge that we need to take notice of, obedience and breaking with the past.

Both Isaiah and Simon accept the mission they are given, Isaiah became one of the most important prophets in Israel's history. He is quoted explicitly ninety times in the New Testament and as many as four hundred times implicitly. Simon became Peter, the chief Apostle and our first pope. They were both obedient to God's call to their mission. But for both these men there was also a break with their past. This break is most clearly seen in Simon-Peter's call to discipleship. He leaves everything and follows Jesus for the rest of his life.

Obedience and change are the more difficult lessons for us to accept. We live in an age of radical self-centeredness, a major obstacle to obedience to God. It is responsible for things like the pro-choice movement which advocates abortion, euthanasia and contraception; the rampant sexual promiscuity we see manifest in premarital relations and alternate lifestyles; the focus on self which contributes to the breakdown of the family and relationships; as well as our obsession with wealth, fame and power. Radical self-centeredness is the root cause for many of today's social problems.

Today we are so concerned about having things our way that we reject obedience to God. It is a battle of wills, my will versus God's will.

Just as he did with Isaiah and Simon-Peter, God has given us a divine summons. But, we can never truly respond to that summons as long as we are dominated by our own will.

The more difficult lessons in today's readings are asking us to break from our past, the past of doing our own will, and change our purpose in life to obediently doing God's will.

There is a threshold between doing our will and doing God's will, between the status quo and breaking with the past. We are being challenged to cross that threshold. Isaiah crossed it, Simon-Peter crossed it as did the other Apostles (except one) and countless Saints down through the ages have crossed it. It is a difficult threshold to cross, but the stakes are high.

Will we let our encounter with the living God change us? Can we break from the past and change our purpose in life? Will we acknowledge our sinfulness and accept God's forgiveness and obediently embrace the mission he gives us? Will we cross the threshold?

May God give us the Grace to do so.