

Ordinary Time 5C 2015

I Am a Sinful Man

Some time ago, a journalist was interviewing Pope Francis. At the outset of the interview, he asked him, “Who are you?” The Pope responded, “I am a sinner.” Before he identified himself by his name, the Pope said, “I am a sinner.” This answer was shocking to many people. Why would the successor of Peter, the Pope of the Holy Roman Catholic Church, identify himself as a sinner? But if you think about the Pope’s answer, it makes perfect sense. Only those who have been touched by God’s grace know they are sinners. Only those who dwell in the radiant light of Christ understand the darkness in which they once lived. Indeed, one of the great mysteries of life is that sinners do not know the depth of their sinfulness until they have been touched by the light of God’s grace.

When the prophet Isaiah enters the temple of God, he has a vision of the all-holy God. For the first time, as he stands in the presence of God, he understands the full depth of his sinfulness, and he cries, out, “Woe to me, I am doomed! For, I am a man of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips.” As he stands in the presence of God who is all-holy, Isaiah knows, in a way he did not before, that he is a sinful human being.

Something similar happens in today’s gospel. Peter and his companions have been fishing all night, and they have caught nothing. But when Jesus tells them to lower their nets, they catch so many fish that their nets begin to tear. Suddenly Peter understands that he is standing in the presence of the all-holy Son of God. He is standing the presence of holiness itself. He is standing in the light of Christ, and in that radiant light he sees himself as he truly is; he is a sinful man!

You see, it is only when we stand in the light that we recognize the darkness. It is only in the light of God's grace that we know our need for mercy and forgiveness. This is why the saints were so conscious of their sinfulness. This is why Pope Francis describes himself as a sinner.

This Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, we will begin the discipline of Lent. The forty days of Lent will be our journey from darkness to light, from sin to grace. But if this Lent is to be different from other Lents, we need to come to a deeper confession of our own sinfulness so that we can stand in the glorious light of Easter. We need to stand in the light of God's grace and mercy. We need to stand in the light of Christ.

We stand in the light of Christ every time we listen to the Word of God with a generous and open heart. We stand in the light of Christ, every time we participate in the Eucharist with faith and devotion. We stand in the light of Christ, every time we stand before Christ as sinners in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. We stand in the light of Christ every time we kneel before the cross and reflect on God's love for us. We stand in the light of Christ every time we give ourselves entirely to Christ in prayer. At such moments, we understand who we truly are. At such times we can say in faith rather than fear, "yes, I am a sinner, but a sinner who has been redeemed by Christ."

As we begin the discipline of Lent this week, let us resolve make this Lent different. Let us resolve that at the end of this Lent we will be standing in a different and better place than we are standing today. Let us resolve to stand in the light of Christ.