

## Epiphany V – 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Year C

In his parting words to the apostles, Jesus left instructions that would become the essential mission of the Church; at the end of Matthew's Gospel he says, *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age”*

Pope Paul VI in his landmark encyclical on evangelization, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), *On Evangelization in the Modern World*, wrote,

*“Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize.”*

Jesus established his Church to Evangelize – this is the Church's job description. Of course the Worship of God is assumed to be a primary task, but the Church's deepest vocation or the mission is to evangelise, every other good that the church does should be secondary to her primary vocation of bringing the Goodnews of God's Love and forgiveness to all peoples.

However, when we speak about evangelization as the essential mission of the Church, that encompasses much more than proclaiming the Gospel. In this sense, evangelization is not just missionary activity. It's referring to a whole process of catechesis/teaching/formation that takes a person from unbelief to full maturity in Christ, who would then become not just a disciple of Christ, but a missionary disciple of Christ. This is emphasised by today's readings and the Gospel. We heard those famous words of Jesus to Simon Peter – **“Do not be afraid; henceforth you will be catching men.”**

Can each of us say when we reflect on our Christian Journey that we are missionary disciples of Christ Jesus? Am I a missionary disciple? What is a

missionary disciple and how can I become a missionary disciple of Christ Jesus?

**A missionary disciple is a person who has had a personal experience with Jesus Christ and has chosen to follow him. They are deeply aware of the call to share the gospel with others, and to be Christ's voice and hands in the world – A missionary disciple, as opposed to a complacent or a lukewarm disciple.**

There are at least two important steps that need to take place in our Faith Journey to become a missionary disciple of Christ, which is the most authentic way to live our Christian Faith in our post-modern world.

The first step or stage is an encounter with God, an encounter with Christ, that deepens our sense of unworthiness or sinfulness and the utter holiness and glorious majesty of God.

A beautiful image of this encounter with God is read to us in our first reading, the vision of Isaiah in the Temple, where he sees the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filling the temple. **He sees the seraphim who had six wings: two to cover his face, two to cover his feet, and two to fly!**

The Hebrew root of seraphim means ‘the burning one’ – you are on fire as it were because you are in the presence of God! His eyes and feet are covered out of reverence but he is on fire with God’s Glory! and these heavenly creatures are praising God in the familiar words we use at every mass **“Holy, Holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory”** –

As Isaiah is encountering God in the spiritual vision he realises his unworthiness and sinfulness – so he says *“Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a*

*man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”*

Just like light uncovers the dirt on a surface, the holiness of God uncovers the sinfulness in the heart of man! In the presence of God we realise our true nature.

This is very similar to Peter’s experience in our Gospel today. When Peter notices the extraordinary catch of fish in broad daylight, Peter realises he is in the presence of divine power. So Peter falls down at Jesus’ feet and says “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” While Isaiah encounters the Glory of God in the Temple, Peter encounters the glory of God in a first century fishing boat!

There is no particular place where we can encounter God and his glory. It is indeed different for different people – for some this encounter is a gradual process but for some it is a clear moment of Grace in a particular place and a particular time. We hear about these divine encounters all throughout the scriptures, all the way from Genesis to Revelation.

By this encounter, I do not mean the intellectual and the political ascent to the claims of Christianity nor the cultural conditioning of our upbringings that keep us in the faith. If we cannot relate to any realisation of God’s presence or an encounter with Christ, we should ask the Lord to reveal his Glory to us in a personal life changing way. **We should not try to reduce the scriptures to fit our faith experience but rather, raise our expectation to fit the scriptural witness**, expect what happens in the scriptures to various characters to happen to us. So the first step or stage of becoming a missionary disciple is to encounter God’s glory in a life changing way and realising that we are not worthy of his call.

G.K. Chesterton once said, “There are saints indeed in my religion; but a saint only means a man who really knows that he is a sinner.” A Saint is someone who know his or her sinfulness. So the distinction is not between sinners and non-sinners, but rather between sinners who know it and those who don’t. This clarification is most important, because sin is known only through contrast with grace, just as shadow is appreciated only in contradistinction to light. The holier we get the deeper we realise our sinfulness and unworthiness;

In a famous dialogue between St Francis and one of his Franciscan brothers, who asks him who is the greatest sinner in the world. In response, St Francis boldly states, “I am the greatest sinner in the world.“ The disciple, astonished, murmured against him, saying, “Surely you’re not serious., You work miracles, and there are so many signs of God's good blessing over your life and vocation. You must be saying this out of some affect, to appear holy or that this is what you think you should say.” To this, St Francis replied, “*If the worst criminal in prison had been given the graces I had been given, I must think he would have made more out of them, or wasted less than I, and be more righteous than I. Thus, I truly believe I am the greatest sinner.*”

The next step towards becoming a missionary disciple is to receive the forgiveness of God and then rely on his strength and wisdom to guide our path/our work. We have to let go of our personal Will and embrace the Will of God. We heard in the story of Isaiah, that the seraphim, the burning one, took a coal from the altar and touched Isaiah’s mouth to purge his unclean lips and his sinfulness, and said “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, your sin forgiven.”

Now that his sin is forgiven and given a new vision for life he is ready to go on behalf of God. And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I

send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here am I! Send me” – Here I am Lord send, me!

This we learn from Peter’s experience as well. He was an experienced fisherman and he knew where the fish was, when to fish and how to fish, so he initially didn’t want to listen to a carpenter for fishing advice. So he said “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing.

But then he had the humility and obedience to listen to Jesus and do his will instead of his own! He listened to the words of Jesus “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch”

The huge haul of fish symbolises the overabundance of good that is promised to those who believe in and follow Jesus. It also symbolises the abundance of the messianic banquet that Jesus brings.

So, Peter began to trust Jesus from this moment onwards and tried to listen to him. We know Peter continued to struggle like all of us in understanding and doing what Jesus wants. But he continued to repent and come back to the Lord. Even after his denial of Jesus, he wept, repented and came back to the Lord, unlike Judas who could not trust in Jesus’s forgiveness. This is a very important spiritual and a psychological principle - Nothing that we have done nor nothing that could happen to us can separate us from the Love of Christ. We can always pick up the pieces and carry on serving the Lord. Every time we fall but repent, Jesus would continue to say to each of us “Do not be afraid; from now on, you will be catching men”

So let us reflect today, the ways we already participate in the task of being a Missionary Disciple, and the new ways the Lord might be pointing to us to take up this missionary call. How are you being asked to “Put out into the deep water?” What could this mean to you in your life?

The Lord is continually asking the question “Whom shall I send? Who will be my messenger? Let us respond to him with Faith and Courage – Here I am Lord, Send me!