

All of today's readings invite us to reflect on the nature of what it means to be in ministry. In one sense, that is what all of the readings during the Season of Epiphany are about: not only has the Light come into the world but that Light yearns to shine through us. But this theme is particularly acute today. By ministry I don't mean the work of the clergy, but of all baptized persons. I don't mean just what we do as individuals, but what we are called to do as a community—as members of Christ's Body. I don't just mean what we do here in church as members of the vestry or altar guild or ushers or lay readers, but the work we are sent into the world to do as witnesses to Christ. Admittedly these readings don't easily fit together; rather, they offer different perspectives based on different times and places. But all of them are about ministry.

Isaiah's call sounds glamorous, but the *ministry* to which he is called is hardly enviable. Isaiah has a mystical encounter with the living God, in all of God's holiness and tremendous mystery. In that encounter, Isaiah is made profoundly aware that he is but flesh and blood; a sinner. Who can stand in the presence of the holy God and not feel unworthy? But that is the beginning of his call, not the end. His sense of unworthiness (or ours!) is of little use to the God who has created us in love to shine forth as light to the world. God sends the seraphs to Isaiah holding a live burning coal and the seraph tells Isaiah that *his guilt has departed and his sin is blotted out*. This is a powerful image and these are powerful words. But in truth it is no different than the absolution we are given as well even if there aren't any apparent seraphs or burning coals to reinforce the message: we are forgiven. Our guilt has departed and our sin is blotted out. Sometimes it is easier to keep wallowing in guilt, to remain stuck in sin. Sometimes others cannot yet forgive us of the hurt we have caused and sometimes we cannot yet forgive ourselves. But the God who has created and redeemed us in love is a forgiving God, a God who has put away our sins and freed us from bondage.

As with Isaiah, forgiveness gives us a shot at abundant life that is filled with possibilities. As baptized persons, our call comes to us from that place of forgiveness—it is that moment that gives us the confidence to stand before the holy God and to find our own voice by responding: “here I am, Lord...send me.” That, I think, is what one of our Eucharistic Prayers is trying to say when we pray: “you have delivered us from evil and made us worthy to stand before you.” (BCP 368)

This sixth chapter of Isaiah is familiar to anyone who has ever attended an ordination service, but I am frustrated that it usually stops at verse eight. Poor Isaiah was called to a very difficult ministry. He will speak, but people will not comprehend; they will look, but not understand. Isaiah's task is to put the hard demands of God before a people who are not yet ready to let go of their comfortable lives. And there is nothing Isaiah can do about that except to hold the vision of the Holy God before them. That is a frustrating, to say the least but that is the work that God calls Isaiah to do. It is a reminder that ministry is about being faithful, not successful. It is a reminder that the *message* is what is important and it cannot be compromised to make it more palatable to a hard-hearted people in a hard-hearted time.

The teacher who dares to teach, in spite of the obstacles the educational system puts before him or the doctor dares to practice medicine in spite of the obstacles that our health care system puts before her; the junior officer who tells his general the truth and not just what he wants to hear or

the mother who says no to her child even when all the other moms have said “ok”—all of them know what it is like to be in Isaiah’s shoes. All are to be commended for their willingness to be faithful in untenable circumstances, with God’s help.

In today’s gospel we find a familiar metaphor, maybe too familiar. What exactly does it mean to “catch people?” I think I know pretty much what it means to catch fish, although I am not much of a fisherman and in my lifetime I’ve not caught too many. Most of my fishing has been sitting and feeling bored because nothing seems to be happening. So I identify with that part of the story in today’s gospel—these fishermen washing their nets after a long night with nothing to show for it.

Insanity is sometimes defined as doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result. So maybe that is what Peter is thinking when he tells Jesus that they have been fishing all night and the fish simply are not biting. Or perhaps, if the disciples are anything like church people, then what Peter is saying is “Lord, we tried it that way a few years back and it didn’t work. Therefore we should never ever consider trying something like that again.”

But for whatever reason (and maybe it’s simply because he is just too tired to argue), Peter lets down the nets one more time and they catch so many fish the nets start to break. Now it is Peter’s turn to recognize as Isaiah did so many centuries before that he is in the presence of holiness, and in the presence of holiness he realizes his own humanity: “Get away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.”

This Gospel reading gives us another perspective on ministry—it’s about when ministry goes well and the nets are overflowing. It’s about when we find ourselves hitting our stride in our chosen professions and life is good. I think we are meant to see this not as a contrast between Old and New Testaments, but rather to notice that ministry has different seasons and times. Both Isaiah’s experience and Peter’s experience are part of the ebb and flow of ministry. In both cases there is a constant: the message is bigger than us. We cannot control whether people will be “caught” or whether they will look and not understand. All we can do is be faithful. Sometimes the gospel will fall on deaf ears and that is terribly discouraging. At other times people will be caught and energized and excited by the possibilities that emerge. *But in both cases it is the message that must remain central.*

And so what is that message exactly? St. Paul is a pretty good person to turn to if we need to clarify that, and he had both good days and bad days in his ministry. Today’s epistle reading, however, written to the troubled congregation in Corinth, is about as good a summary of what St. Paul was up to as anything he wrote. After reminding the baptized community there that it’s not about him (nor is it about Peter or any of the twelve,) he says simply that the message that they (and we) are entrusted to proclaim is about Jesus Christ, the one who “...*died for our sins and was buried and on the third day was raised from the dead, in accordance with the scriptures.*”

That is the work we have been given to do. We shouldn’t feel as if that means we need to stand on an urban street corner passing out tracts. We should feel that we are called as St. Francis was to preach the gospel at all times, and when necessary to use words. We should feel that we are meant to live as if we truly do believe we are a forgiven people. We should live as if we share

not only in Christ's death but his resurrection for that is what Baptism has done—is to claim us and form us as an Easter people.

We won't always get it right. Sometimes we speak and act in all the right ways and yet it falls on deaf ears. Other times we will almost reluctantly, almost in desperation, give it one last shot and somehow the timing will be just right, and infinitely more than we could ask or imagine starts to unfold. People get caught and there is new energy and new joy and all things seem possible. The results are not in our control but the work and the message remain the same.

I was baptized in 1963 and have been a servant of Christ ever since. In June 1988, I was ordained in the United Methodist Church. Five years later I was ordained a second time, as a deacon at Christ Church Cathedral in Hartford, Connecticut. And then six months after that, on February 5, 1994, I was ordained to the priesthood at Christ and Holy Trinity Church in Westport, Connecticut. This past Friday, on the Feast of the Martyrs of Japan, I celebrated the sixteenth anniversary of my ordination to the priesthood.

You may or may not know the story about those martyrs of Japan but it is a story worth recalling, so let me do so very briefly. The Christian faith was first introduced to Japan in the sixteenth century by Jesuit and Franciscan missionaries. By the end of that century, there were probably about 300,000 baptized believers in Japan. Unfortunately, this promising beginning met reverses brought about by politics—both church politics and international politics. Rivalries between different groups of missionaries and conflicts between Spanish, Portuguese, and Japanese governments become untenable. So on February 5, 1597, six Franciscan friars, three Japanese Jesuits and seventeen Japanese laypersons were crucified in Nagasaki, Japan. Many other Christians were arrested, imprisoned for life, or tortured and killed; by 1630 the Church had been totally driven underground.

Were these martyrs “successful?” Not by any of the modern standards of church growth they weren't! They went from 300,000 Christians to almost zero, at least who would confess their faith openly. Yet history must judge their ministry as faithful, even if it wasn't successful. More than four hundred years later we remember them precisely because they *did* bear witness to Christ, literally sharing in his death on a cross.

Ministry is the work to which we are all called. We'll contribute to this mission in different ways, based on our differing passions and gifts. It has always been thus. Sometimes we'll feel like it's all working together, like we can do no wrong, as if the nets are breaking because of the great catch. In those moments we do well to remember that it's not about us; the proper response to abundance is to say “thank you.” And when it feels like we are spinning our wheels and we are working so hard but nothing is happening; when we feel like Isaiah of Jerusalem or St. Paul or the martyrs of Japan, we do well in those seasons of ministry to remember that it's not about us then either. And that even our failures and our disappointments can be occasions for us to say “thank you,” because they remind us that we are dependent not on our own efforts or results, but upon God's abundant mercy.

In all things, we are witnesses who point to Jesus, who even now is in our midst. That is what holds us together. That is what makes us the Church.