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Awe and Contrition before God

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Awe and Contrition before God

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Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 10, 2013 Sunday Readings for Cycle C:

Is 6:1-8; 1 Cor 15:1-11; Lk 5:1-11

AWE AND CONTRITION BEFORE GOD

Lawrence E. Frizzell

How do we perceive our relationship with God? Does the beauty of a sunrise or a rainbow inspire a prayer of thanks for the wonders of Creation? Indeed, divine goodness, mercy and righteousness should be perceived through the veil of creaturehood. "All the earth is filled with God's glory!" But some people are oblivious to the ways in which God's power and wisdom permeate all reality. Many would miss as well the insight that we must live conscious of the challenge to conform our lives to a sublime model of excellence. "Be holy as I, the Lord your God, am holy!" (Lev 19:2). So a continuing education is necessary for all.

The ancient Israelites recognized that personal and community existence is bound by space and time. Their laws governed the rhythms of life by careful designation of specific times and places for worship. Moreover, coming to worship involved a transition from secular to sacred with prayers and ceremonies that called for an examination of conscience. Thus pilgrims to the Temple in Jerusalem were challenged: "O Lord, who shall sojourn in your tent? Who shall dwell on your holy mountain?" (Ps 15:1). The person was expected to live with integrity in day-to-day existence, dedicated to the one God and honest in human relationships (see also Ps 24:3-6). The drama of worship in the Temple evoked an awareness that we live in God's presence, called to reflect the divine image in the fabric of our lives. Thus, in the year 742 B.C., an aristocrat of Jerusalem named Isaiah was overwhelmed by the divine majesty in the Temple. He perceived two mysterious seraphim, aflame with intensity of their love, worshiping in humble modesty and awe before the Creator and King of the universe. They proclaimed God's supreme holiness, because repetition of a term in Hebrew conveys the notion of the superlative. Complete separation from all that is tainted is essential to the concept of holiness in Hebrew, so Isaiah expressed his sense of human sinfulness. "Woe is me, I am doomed! For I am a man of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips..." (Is 6:5). Well aware of the truth that no one shall see God and live (Gn 16:13; 32:31), Isaiah acknowledged his unworthiness. No doubt he had recited a prayer of confession as he entered the Temple, but now the transcendence of God took on a deeper meaning.

God never leaves the honest, humble person to wallow in a sense of inadequacy. There is work to be done, and that is why Isaiah was privileged to know God-and-himself in a new way. Important as our own prayers and ablutions are when we enter God's presence, *divine* action is necessary for us to be transformed. The Israelites used water and fire for purification, so Isaiah experienced cleansing by an incandescent coal from the altar of incense. Words interpret the experience: "Now that this has touched your lips, your wickedness is removed, your sin purged" (6:7). Then he is capable of responding to the divine commission to teach and admonish, uplift and guide the rulers and people of Judah.

The sublime vision of Isaiah has exerted a powerful influence on Jewish and Christian liturgy and spirituality. We all recognize that this text is the source of the "Sanctus" of the Mass. How many have noticed the priest or deacon bowing in prayer before proclaiming the Gospel? "Cleanse my heart and my lips, O Lord, as you cleansed the lips of the prophet Isaiah, so that I may worthily proclaim your holy Gospel." An awesome responsibility is the mission of continuing Christ's work! Do pray that God's servants be ever more worthy of the task.

The Gospel might occasion a smile. Simon, the experienced fisherman, hears a carpenter telling him how to make a catch! How many of us would have ridiculed the advice? But Simon had already seen the carpenter rebuild the lives of the afflicted, so he obeyed. What was his reaction to the marvelous catch? "Leave me, Lord, for I am a sinful man" (Lk 5:8). In the midst of the mundane he recognized that Jesus manifested God's holiness. There was no dramatic act of purification at this point, but the assurance of divine care. "Do not be afraid!" These words, heard by Zechariah (Lk 1:13), Mary (1:30) and the shepherds at Bethlehem (2:10), prepare for a commission of service. "From now on you will be catching people!" But first the fishermen became learners at the feet of the Master so that they could draw other to the flame of divine love.