

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
February 10, 2013
Homily for the Anglican Use Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Luke 5:1-11

I've told you before about the difference in God's providence when we compare our ministry in the Episcopal Church and our ministry today. Most notably, when we were still at Good shepherd we had an endowment that we were continually raiding, and since we became Catholic, the Lord has provided for all our needs; and this has been without any investment income.

When we were down in Texas last weekend, I had the opportunity to speak with some of my brother priests in the Ordinariate, and I learned that their experience of the Lord's providence parallels our own. For example, Fr. David Ousley, the leader of the Ordinariate group in Philly, told me that the size of his congregation has doubled since their reconciliation to Holy Mother Church and his ordination to the priesthood. Msgr. Steenson, our Ordinary, also spoke to us about a five million dollar donation our new jurisdiction received in the form of a five-acre tract of land just behind Our Lady of Walsingham in Houston. The intention is to build an Ordinariate Chancery, along with a house of Anglican studies to help form our many men with vocations to the holy priesthood. He said we have practically more candidates than we can handle, so many former Anglican clergy presenting themselves for Holy Orders that we can't yet begin a program of formation for men who have never been to seminary.

Listening to these testimonies reminded me of the gospel we heard today, when St. Peter took nothing as he labored all night, but then at Jesus' command took so many fish that the nets began to break and the boats began to sink. By analogy, I realized that for years we labored in the dark, and we took in less than we needed. Since we began taking instruction from the Vicar of Christ, from Jesus Himself, we and those who have made the same decision have benefitted from the Lord's bounty. While I can't deny that a certain element of grace was attached to our former ministry, other contrasts are striking: as an Episcopal clergyman, I lost every election to every diocesan office I was in. Yet when we were in Houston last week, Msgr. Steenson asked if he could appoint me to the council of priests that will govern the Ordinariate for the next three years. Humbled that our work here in Scranton has been noticed, I told him I'd be happy to serve in that capacity. Where once we received ridicule, we have now been rewarded with responsibility.

The other thing about today's Gospel that reminded me of our own experience was St. Peter's reaction to the grace bestowed upon him. He knew he was not worthy of the Lord's bounty, so he fell at Jesus knees and said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." I also know that our sinfulness makes us unworthy of God's great providence and the responsibility He wants to give to us. I thought of St. Paul's line from today's Epistle: "For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the Church of God." Now I never murdered anyone, but that verse applies to me insofar as I spent too many years outside the sheepfold; and, more than that, as a Protestant clergyman, I gave aid and comfort as Rector of our former parish to all kinds of Catholics who preferred laxity and their authority to the moral rigor and authority found only in the Catholic Church.

We don't know what Peter's sin was, but however wicked he may have been, his weakness did not disqualify him from leadership in Christ's true Church. In the same way, our status as converts and reverts who came so late into the fold does not disqualify us from working in the vineyard alongside men and women who have devoted their entire lives to the fullness of the Faith and the proclamation of the Truth. We aren't really worthy to have been the reason the Prefect for the Congregation of the Faith made his first ever trip to the United States; yet last week in Houston, there we were, being complimented by him, even as he sought to give us further encouragement.

The lesson we can take from the examples of St. Peter, St. Paul, and our little band of converts from across the U.S. and Canada is that the Lord does not require perfection of his disciples when He calls them to ministry. If this were the case, the Church would have no ministers at all, since all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. What Jesus does require is a willingness to leave our former lives behind and follow Him to become fishers of men.

We learn, also, that Christ's forgiveness is greater than our sin. St. Peter became the first bishop of Rome only after he had denied our Lord three times. St. Paul received the crown of martyrdom after he had been responsible for the death of the Church's first martyr, St. Stephen. And we've been asked to reconcile people to Holy Mother Church after many of us spent years drawing people away from the Chief Shepherd of the sheep. In any other organization such disloyalty would mean being ostracized forever, with rehabilitation impossible. Among the communists such disloyalty would get us shot. But in the Church, in the vessel of God's love for all mankind, our disloyalty is forgiven, we are rehabilitated, and then we are used to bring glory to Him who forgave us our sin. Yes, we are not worthy, but our unworthiness does not make us useless, either. Instead, God showers us with His gifts and then finds a use for us, a use He has not assigned to anyone else. Rather than punish us for our years outside the fold, He sends emissaries from Rome to tell us how happy He is we've finally come home.

As we approach the season of Lent, which for us begins this Wednesday with a day of fasting and abstinence, it is important for us to remember this lesson: after the purgation comes the party. God doesn't want us to wallow in our sins forever, never able to forgive ourselves for what He long ago forgave us. Rather, Jesus wants us to get to work bringing to others the same bounty and message of salvation that we ourselves have benefitted from already. In other words, we can't approach our penitential season with dread, but should look to it with anticipation. After all, once we have said good-bye to our sins, we have a beautiful mission to fulfill. And God is going to give us all that we need to do what He's asked us to do. If He wills it, we'll receive the means to accomplish the task.