

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Last week's first reading introduced the prophet Jeremiah, who accepted his ministry with reluctance and exercised it amid enemies anxious to destroy him. Today's first reading introduces the prophet Isaiah, who accepted his ministry with eagerness and exercised it over a long career. Both passages precede gospels in which Jesus began his ministry and when Peter received his calling. They make us think about the ways each of us responds to God's call.

Isaiah considered himself nothing special. He called himself "a man of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips." If you find yourself using a vocabulary of which you are not proud because you consort with people who use similar words, you know how Isaiah felt. Or if you gossip and speak ill of others behind their backs, you also know what it is to have unclean lips.

One day Isaiah walked into the holiest part of the Temple in Jerusalem and beheld a vision of God, sitting upon a throne, his enormous robe filling the space already beclouded with smoke, angels hovering above. When Isaiah saw all of that, aware of his own sins, he concluded he was doomed. God had appeared to him before Isaiah had taken time to repent. We too may fear that we will die before we are ready to see God face to face.

Isaiah was right about his sin but wrong about his damnation. One angel grasped a pair of tongs, pinched a burning coal from the incense burner at the altar, and flew near to Isaiah's face. The angel pressed the burning ember onto Isaiah's puckered lips and said, "Your wickedness is removed, your sin purged."

At Mass, just before the gospel, when you see the priest pray over the deacon, the priest says, "May the Lord be in your heart and on your lips, that you may proclaim his Gospel worthily and well." But when there is no deacon, the priest offers a similar prayer for himself, one more closely based on this passage from Isaiah. He doesn't ask God merely to "be" on his lips; rather, he prays, "Cleanse my heart and my lips, almighty God, that I may worthily proclaim your holy Gospel." The priest feels like Isaiah, not worthy to speak what God wants him to say, needing to have his lips cleansed of foul words, harsh judgment and deceit. Only by kissing the ember can a priest read words as sacred as the gospel.

We often think of prophets as individuals who foretell the future, but the bible presents them differently. The bible's priests carry the prayers of the people to God; the bible's prophets carry the message of God to the people. Sometimes God's message scolds; other times it promises.

No matter the condition of our lips, God calls each of us to be a prophet. At your baptism, when the priest or deacon put chrism on your head, he declared that God anoints you "with the Chrism of salvation, so that you may remain members of Christ, Priest, Prophet and King, unto eternal life." We are baptized into the ministry of Christ the prophet, the messenger of God's word.

God calls us to use our sinful lips for nobler purposes: to correct those who are wrong, to encourage those who do well, to speak our faith when others reject it. In those instances, some angel has purged away the sin from our lips. We speak God's message. That's what prophets do.

Sunday, February 6, 2022