

Homily for February 7, 2010 (5th Sunday in Ordinary Time, C)
Isaiah 6:1-2, 3-8; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11

About ten days ago, I did something I hadn't done in several years: I watched the President's State of the Union Address before a joint session of Congress in its entirety. Since this was Barack Obama's first such effort and given the tremendous challenges facing our country today—everything from unemployment to war to climate change—I was curious to hear him.

Among other things, our President's speech was long—about 70 minutes. It seemed that at least half of its length was due to interruptions for applause or, more accurately, one side of the aisle applauding enthusiastically and the other side silently and sullenly sitting on their hands. On occasion, my mind drifted back in history to the speeches of other presidents at times of great national challenge: Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address; John F. Kennedy's speech in Berlin during the Cold War; and Ronald Reagan's dare to Soviet Premier Gorbachov to “tear down that wall” separating East and West Berlin.

But perhaps no other speech and time so closely paralleled our own than President Franklin Roosevelt's Inaugural Address upon taking office in 1933, when our country was in the depths of the Great Depression. While things then were far worse than today, there are parallels: millions of people were out of work; millions of families were losing their homes; people were losing confidence not only in the Wall Street and the banks but also in their elected officials and even in themselves. Faced with the huge task of reassuring a shaky nation, President Roosevelt began his speech with words that echo today with a new resonance:

This is preeminently the time to speak the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly. Nor need we shrink from honestly facing conditions in our country today.... So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.

Fear is a powerful force. A fear of failure or at least of failing to meet the standards we have set for ourselves can spur us to excel. The fear punishment or ridicule can keep us from doing something wrong or stupid. Fear can also cause us to lash out at those people and things we perceive to be threats to us; and it can metastasize into various forms of prejudice. Fear, as President Roosevelt recognized in his fellow Americans 77 years ago, can also paralyze us.

Today's scripture readings recall a more basic fear that we can face as children of God and followers of Christ: the fear of ourselves and our own unworthiness. We can feel unworthy of being, speaking and acting in response to the Lord. But the good news is that, regardless of how we look at ourselves, God *knows* that we are worthy and indeed *makes* us worthy!

In our first reading, Isaiah had to deal with his *fear to speak* for the Lord. Called to his prophetic ministry over seven centuries before the time of Christ, Isaiah was already a high priest. This gave him a certain amount of prestige and a stake in the religious, political and cultural status quo of Judah. The only problem was that his nation was rotting from the inside out. While its leaders and people were observing the correct religious rituals, they were forgetting other essential elements of their covenant with God: justice, especially for the poor and vulnerable; avoiding greed; and relying on God as their security rather than their alliances with other nations.

As part of “the system,” Isaiah could see this; and he had enough integrity to recognize his own sinfulness. “Woe is me,” he cried, “I am doomed. For I am a man of unclean lips living among a people of unclean lips.” I suspect that most of us can relate to Isaiah’s plea. Perhaps we feel inarticulate or uneducated; maybe we worry about what others might think; or, like Isaiah, we may simply recognize the gap between the faith we profess and the faith we live.

Fortunately, God’s grace and the Holy Spirit enable us to speak even when we think we can’t. Isaiah had a vision of a burning coal touching his lips. It symbolized the purifying power of God’s grace and the ability of God’s word to burn consciences and separate the good from the bad. We need that power today.

Paul, like Isaiah, knew well the feeling of his unworthiness to not only preach *but even to be*. In our second reading he testified to the church at Corinth that while he was indeed an apostle (from the Greek word for “messenger”), albeit one born unnaturally (i.e., without having been a personal witness to Jesus’ life and ministry), he was unworthy of the title and ministry because at one time he had persecuted the church. Many of us, recalling our personal mistakes and past or present sins, perhaps fearing being labeled hypocrites, or even despairing of God’s mercy, can easily sell ourselves short when called to serve God. Like, Paul, however, we are called not to lean on our own strength but to trust in God’s grace.

Even when we embrace that grace and begin to live in it—speaking, thinking, and acting as God calls us—we can have moments of doubt. Sometimes, like St. Peter in our gospel reading, we are simply *tired*—too tired. Just in from a long and fruitless night of fishing, Peter was first called into service by the Lord and then told to take his boat into the deep and again put down the nets he’d just finished mending and cleaning. He did so, but not very enthusiastically.

But Jesus rewarded Peter’s faith and willingness to risk. After realizing what had happened and reflecting on his powerful experience of God’s grace, Peter was so overwhelmed he could only tell the Lord to go away and leave him alone. Jesus refused. Instead he called Peter to a new life and ministry; and Peter, setting aside his fear, responded. Will we? +