

Sunday: 5-C
University Mass

Holy Rosary Cathedral

9 February 2019

Dear brother priests and deacons, dear administrators, faculty and students of the colleges and universities of the Archdiocese of Vancouver: dear friends in Christ:

Introduction

It is always a great pleasure to celebrate with you this now Annual University Mass, and I thank you especially for the extra effort it involved tonight because of the harsh weather conditions.

My special thanks to all those who work in the campus ministry and chaplaincy offices at our institutions of higher learning, especially I wish to express my gratitude to Father Julio, the chaplain at SFU who, with Lioba, really helped organized this evening; Father Rob, chaplain at Corpus Christi and St. Mark's Colleges; and Matt Martin at the John Paul II Pastoral Centre. And I would be remiss if I did not give a shout-out to CCO for the courageous missionary work they are carrying out on the campuses of SFU and UBC.

At this Eucharist we come together to praise and thank the Lord for his call to you to be engaged in higher education as students, faculty or administrators. Because you are baptized into Christ Jesus, he calls you to let the radiant light of the truth and beauty of his Gospel shine on your learning, research, and activities. You know well the difficult but

exciting challenges that you meet because you take your faith seriously on campus and want it to be relevant to all your day-to-day activities and interactions with friends and colleagues.

Reflections on the Readings

Theophany and Unworthiness Cleansed

In the First Reading we heard proclaimed, Isaiah is sent reeling by the magnificence of a heavenly vision. He fears that the divine splendour he experienced will bring with it an inexorable demand that he could not meet because of his sinfulness: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips” (Is 6:5). Like us, when we experience God, even if it be but a gentle whisper, we become aware of our “absolute unworthiness.”¹ But then the Angel came from God with the burning ember to purify him by touching his lips.

This baptismal-like gesture not only cleansed Isaiah from sin but it created a new being, giving him a new heart, a new strength and a new calling for him to be a prophet.

Simon Peter’s Call

Now, in light of this evening’s Gospel, just for a moment place yourselves in Simon Peter’s shoes, in the shoes of the fisherman. For a

¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Light of the Word* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 275.

few minutes, imagine that “*you are Peter.*”

St. Luke presents Simon as one who, like the Prophet Isaiah, was overcome by his encounter with God’s awesome greatness, which he saw revealed in Jesus.

The account begins simply enough, with Jesus’ gesture of getting into Simon’s boat and pushing a little out from the shore from where he kept on teaching the pressing crowds.

“Duc in Altum!”: “Put out into the deep water”

In return for Simon’s small favour, Jesus then orders him to “put out into deep water [they had been in shallow water near the shore] and let down [his] your nets for a catch” (Lk 5:4). This an odd request, given that Simon tells him that he had been fishing all night with his friends, but had caught nothing (cf. Lk 5:5)

Simon did as he was told by Jesus. Even though the Master was not known to be a skilled fisherman, Simon trusted Jesus. But his trust was shaky. He seems to have oscillated between doubt – are you kidding, we’ve been fishing all night? – and faith – “if you say so.”² This, it seems to me, is the situation many of us as disciples. We hover between doubt – it’s too good to be true, and faith – I am willing to stake my whole life on Jesus.

² Cf. James Martin, *Jesus: A Pilgrimage* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), 157.

The Miraculous Catch

After lowering his nets in the deep water, Simon's are suddenly filled to the bursting point.

Oddly enough, the Apostle was not immediately grateful, but full of dread when faced with the weight of the miraculous catch of fish hauled in. It was causing the two boats to sink, and swamping him in the process! Such excess is often the case with Jesus' miracles. They point to his infinite graciousness and overflowing mercy, just like the overabundance of wine at Cana.

Whereas we so often live and act in a world of skimpiness and narrowness, the real world, God's world, as Jesus shows here, is one of overflowing grace. He gives us far more than we deserve!

Peter's Fear: "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man."

Aware of his own unworthiness at being chosen to haul in such a great catch, Simon shouts out: "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man" (Lk 5:8).

We, too, can be tempted to cry out with the same words when the Lord draws near to us. At times we find it hard to believe that Christ is calling us personally to abide with him and to carry out his mission in our world. We see our own weaknesses and frailty. We know that we are as full of holes as a sponge. "Could he not have chosen someone else,

more capable, more holy?” we ask. “But Jesus has looked lovingly upon each one of us, and in this gaze of his we may have confidence.”³ It is precisely in this way, in the humility of one who knows that he or she is a sinner that we are called.⁴

Simon Peter thought that there should be distance between himself as a sinner and Jesus, the Holy One. But, as Pope Francis has reminded us in commenting on this passage, “In truth, his [Peter’s] very condition as a sinner requires that the Lord not distance himself from him, in the same way that a doctor cannot distance himself from those who are sick.”⁵

It is not shameful, therefore, for us to feel as Peter did. On the contrary, it is spiritually necessary that we recognize our own inadequacy and sinfulness before the living God, before daring to embark on any mission he might call upon us to carry out.

Jesus’ Reply: “Do not be afraid”

In Jesus’ reply to Simon’s drawing back in fear, once again we see the Lord’s tenderness. He did not reproach or scold him for his lack of faith. Rather, he invited him to trust and to be open to a new adventure

³ Benedict XVI, Address to the Clergy, Warsaw (25 May 2006).

⁴ Cf. Benedict XVI, Homily, Mass of the Lord’s Supper (21 April 2011).

⁵ Francis, Angelus (7 February 2016).

with him. Such an adventure rightly surpasses all expectation: “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people” (Lk 5:10).

Just as Jesus comforted Peter by showing his confidence in him, so, too, he takes each of us by the hand, drawing us to himself and saying: “Do not be afraid! I am with you. I will not abandon you; do not leave me!”⁶

Today, you are, each one of you, being called to leave the shallow waters “where everything is safe, secure and well insured”,⁷ and to put out into the deep sea of the world around you and to let down the nets of the Gospel, so as to win your friends and colleagues to God, to Christ, to true life. After all, “Only when we meet the living God in Christ do we know what life is. . . . There is nothing more beautiful than to know him [Christ] and to speak to others of our friendship with him.”⁸

That day on the lakeshore Peter could not have imagined that one day he would preach the Gospel fearlessly as a “fisher of men” for his Lord, even to the shedding of his blood for love of him. The Apostle accepted this surprising call, and let himself be involved in this great adventure. He was generous; he recognized his limits, but ultimately he

⁶ Cf. Benedict XVI, Homily at the Chrism Mass (13 April 2006).

⁷ Francis, Homily, World Youth Day, Panama (27 January 2019).

⁸ Benedict XVI, Homily at the Mass for the Inauguration of the Petrine Ministry of the Bishop of Rome (24 April 2005).

believed in the One who was calling him and followed him.

Like Mary's trusting "yes" to the Angel Gabriel (cf. Lk 1:38), Peter, too, said "yes," a courageous "yes," and became a disciple of Jesus.⁹

This is what the Lord asks of each of you: to say "yes" from your heart to the will of the Father, inscrutable and mysterious though it be: "thy will be done."

One thing for sure is that, if everyone is "Peter," then the Lord wants each of us to fish for people, for the women and men whom he places on our path. We can do this "fishing" only because Jesus promises to be by our side. He knows who we are. He knows our past, but that is not what is important to him. Jesus has cast his nets wide, and we are his catch. He will not go away from us. That's why he says over and over again: "Do not be afraid, for I am with you – and with you now."

Conclusion

Indeed, he is with us now, especially now, as we continue our celebration of the Eucharist in which the living Jesus makes himself present before the Father and for us, nourishing us, so that we might accomplish what he wants to accomplish *in us* and *through us*.

⁹ Cf. Benedict XVI, General Audience (17 May 2006).

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