

“Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man” (Lk 5:8)

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C

By: Fr. David

These words were spoken by Peter in response to the miraculous catch of fish. If we think about it this is an odd response to a miracle. We could expect Peter to say, “Thank you Lord for the fish, the village will now have lots of food.” But instead we hear Peter say, “depart from me, go away from me, for I am a sinful man.” A little odd don’t you think?

What makes this response even more of a mystery, is that this is not the first miracle that Peter has witnessed. At the time when the miraculous catch of fish took place, Peter had already been a follower of Jesus. Peter had met Jesus at the Jordan. He accompanied Jesus to the wedding of Cana and had seen the miracle of changing water into wine; but there he gave no response. He had seen Jesus cast out demons and witnessed Jesus heal his own mother in law; again, no response. So If Peter had already seen Jesus perform miracles, then why does he now fall to his knees declaring his own sinfulness.

Well, we can see the beginnings of an answer, if we look at the way Peter addresses Jesus before the miraculous catch of fish and after. Before the catch, when Jesus asks Peter to let down his nets into the deep, Peter responds calling Jesus “Master”. “Master,” he says, “we have worked all night long but have caught nothing, but if you say so, we will let down our nets.” By calling Jesus, “Master” Peter is acknowledging that Jesus is special. He is a master because he teaches well, he is a master because his prayers seem to work. He is a master because he is somehow better than others at what he does. But nothing more.

Now after Peter lets down his nets and they start to fill up with fish, He turns to Jesus and calls him something different. He says, “depart from me ‘Lord’ for I am a sinful man.” Peter no longer calls Jesus “Master” but “Lord”.

To us that may not sound like a big change but to people in Israel, there was a huge difference between “Master” and “Lord”. Any person could be a Master if they had worked hard enough and climbed the ladder of society. A king or queen were masters to their subjects, teachers were masters to their students, heads of households were masters to their servants. A master was a word that indicated a superior. But the word “Lord”, that was a special word. Lord was the word that referred to God alone. The word in Hebrew was “adoni” and it was used for the one God of Israel. When they prayed, they called God “adoni” they called him Lord.

And so, Peter, in moving from calling Jesus master to Lord is moving from seeing Jesus as simply a superior to God. The difference between a good teacher and God is huge. And so Peter, realizing who Jesus is, that He has the almighty God, creator of the universe, right here in the boat with him. He reacts differently. He has to. So Peter kneels down, and acknowledges his sinfulness saying “go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man.” He sees who Jesus really is: Lord, Adoni, God.

Now a question we can ask ourselves is whether Peter’s response was the proper one. To Say, “Go away from me Lord for I am a sinful man.” When in the presence of God is it good to acknowledge our sinfulness. Well what is the first thing that we do when we come to mass? We start with the sign of the cross, the priest greets us by saying ‘the Lord be with you’, then the priest says, ‘brother and sisters, let us acknowledge our sins.’ It may not be the first thing we do at mass, but it is pretty close.

It is almost as if we are like Peter. When we come to mass we recognize that we are in the presence of God, and so like Peter we acknowledge our sinfulness.

Now there is one way in which we depart from Peter. While Peter was correct in acknowledging his own sinfulness, he was wrong in his solution to that problem. Seeing himself as unworthy to be in the presence of God, Peter says, “depart from me Lord.” His solution is that Jesus leave him. We on the other hand, while acknowledging our sinfulness do not seek a solution in separation, but rather in forgiveness. After we acknowledge our sins at mass we say, “Lord have Mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy.” We ask God’s forgiveness, so that we might be made worthy to be in the presence of God at mass.

We also have the sacrament of confession. If we reflect upon our actions and see that some do not reflect the actions of a person who encounters God at mass every Sunday then, we do not run away from God. Rather, we go to confession, seek God's forgiveness so that we might be made worthy to stand in his presence and receive him in Holy Communion.

After Peter told Jesus to "go away from him" Jesus did not leave. He called Peter to follow him. Jesus was not going to let Peter's sins get in the way and he isn't going to let ours. Let us acknowledge our sins and seek forgiveness so that we, like Peter, might leave everything to follow Our Lord.