

THE HOUND OF HEAVEN: 5TH SUNDAY C

Recently, a Baptist lady said to a Catholic priest: *'God is so big and we are so puny.'* The lady's humility somewhat surprised the priest, because she was an outstanding Christian. She and her husband had built a hospital in Africa. She had trained a group of young women to nurse the poor. Now in her 80's she was still reading the bible and praying every day. When the priest asked her what her life, her work and her faith had taught her most of all, she simply said: *'God is so big and we are so puny.'*

That Christian lady had discovered from life experience that her smallness, her insignificance, even her sense of being unworthy, did not stop God from doing good things, even big things, using her as his humble agent and instrument. It was the same with the Old Testament priest, Isaiah. He caught a glimpse of the glory and majesty of God in the Jerusalem temple. Compared with God he saw himself not just as puny, but as completely unworthy of what he saw. So he cried out: *'What a wretched state I am in! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips.'* But God transformed him, by sending an angel to touch his lips with a burning coal and purify him. Now he was ready to be God's messenger, and was able to say to God with confidence and enthusiasm: *'Here I am, send me.'* The apostle Paul too insisted [in our Second Reading] that it was *'by the grace of God that he gave me'* that he became an apostle, a missionary for Christ. Much the same may be said of Simon Peter and his friends. They too had an experience of the bigness, the generosity – in short they had a profound experience of the *'amazing grace'* of God.

In their case it happened through taking Jesus at his word, believing in him and trusting him. As a result, despite toiling all night, and not netting a single fish, now in the daytime they were hauling in a massive catch. So, in the presence of the power and generosity of God, Peter drops to his knees and says to Jesus: *'Leave me, Lord; I am a sinful man.'* Jesus is not put off by this. He has big plans for Peter and the others. Jesus tells them: *'Do not be afraid; from now on it is people you will catch.'* There and then, supported by his trust in them, they leave everything – occupation, home, family, location and property – to join Jesus in netting people into the kingdom of God.

At different times in our lives, God has been in touch with us as well. God has spoken to us and called us to do God's work. Usually there hasn't been

anything particularly grand about where God has called us. With Isaiah it was at his work the Jerusalem temple. With Paul it happened as he was galloping towards the city of Damascus on his horse. With Peter and his companions it was while they were trying without success that night to catch fish. So too with you and me, God has tracked us down where we live or work or pray.

Notice that I just said, *'God has tracked us down.'* I now say that God will keep tracking us down, and never stop tracking us down. In a famous poem he calls *'The Hound of Heaven'*, the poet Francis Thompson, reflecting on his life-experience of trying to run away from God, presents God as being like a bloodhound, who never stops chasing us till he catches up with us and reaches us so irresistibly, that finally we surrender to God and to God's great expectations and dreams for us. The whole powerful truth of this is captured in the very first verse of the poem. Let me quote it now:

'I fled him, down the nights and down the days; I fled him down the arches of the years: I fled him down the labyrinthine ways of my own mind; and in the mist of tears I hid from him, and under running laughter. Up vistaed hopes I sped; and shot, precipitated, adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears, from those strong Feet that followed, followed after. But with unhurrying chase, and unperturbed pace, deliberate speed, majestic instancy, they beat – and a Voice beat more instant than the feet – "All things betray thee, who betrayest me".'

There's simply no getting away from God. For us too, resisting God and saying *'Leave me, Lord, I'm not good enough. I'm a sinner'* won't be the end of the matter. If God could use Peter for God's good work with people, or Paul, or Isaiah, or the Baptist lady, God can and will purify and use us too to do good things, truly beautiful things in fact, for both God and God's people.

So we better stand by, ready to hear his call! At any time! At any age! In any place! In any situation! Ready to say, like Isaiah: *'Here I am, send me.'*

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