

## The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany (Year C)

Saint Mark's, Tampa

4 February 2007

✠ I speak to you in the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

I used to think it was the surest indicator of the differences between liberals and conservatives in the Episcopal Church. Conservatives, I thought, loved it; liberals hated it. But then I heard the most conservative priest in my diocese trashing it, sounding for all the world like my own rector, one of the most liberal priests in the diocese.

"It" is the Prayer of Humble Access. In case you don't have the entire Prayer Book memorized, you might want to turn to page 337 and keep your finger there, because I'll keep coming back to it. I know that this prayer doesn't really get used here at Saint Mark's, since it doesn't belong in Rite Two. But I just don't know how to talk about today's lessons without also talking about the Prayer of Humble Access.

Especially if this prayer is coming at you fresh, you can see why it's the most unpopular prayer in the Prayer Book, loathed (as I now know) by liberals and conservatives alike:

*We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table.*

Well, I mean, *come on*. "Not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table." That's laying it on a little thick, isn't it? Oh sure, we're not perfect or anything, but we're really not as bad as all that. I mean, it would be *nice* if some of our very mild shortcomings were taken care of, but there's no great urgency to it. We're Christians, after all. Heck, we're even *Episcopalians* – which is the best kind! God is pretty pleased with us, in a benign, grandfatherly sort of way, and fortunately it just so happens that God's political views, liturgical tastes, and interpretation of Scripture coincide beautifully with our own.

Yet what do we find in today's lessons?

In the year that King Uzziah died, Isaiah saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty. His royal robes spilled over the throne and filled the temple. The seraphim shouted his praises back and forth. The heavy doors of the temple shook on their

massive hinges and the mystery of God's presence filled the house like a thick smoke. And Isaiah said, "Hey, Lord, what's up? Nice to see ya."

No. Let's try that again. Isaiah said:

Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!

You see, as the great Anglican writer Austin Farrer once said, the gravity of sin is in balance with the weight of glory. If I see God as a benign, grandfatherly presence who just really wants me to be as nice as possible, I have no reason to say "I am not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table." But when Isaiah sees God in his majesty and holiness, when he encounters the overwhelming fullness of God, he can only say, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips." The weight of God's glory is so overpowering that the gravity of Isaiah's sin is fully revealed.

Then we turn to the Gospel. When Simon Peter saw the miracle, he fell down on his knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." He's not confessing any *particular* sin. In fact, his behavior in this episode is quite admirable. Jesus tells him to do something that makes no sense at all, and he does it, for no other reason than because Jesus says so. That's true obedience. No, Peter is not confessing any *particular* sin. It's just that the sheer overwhelming *goodness* of Jesus produces a sense of unworthiness. The weight of Jesus' glory is so vast that the gravity of his own sin becomes too much for Peter to bear.

*We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table.*

It is a dizzying, frightening thing to get a glimpse of the grandeur, the majesty, the *awesomeness* of God. And when I think of the audacious generosity of God's plan of redemption – that he would pour his boundless love into the narrow vessel of our human existence, yet pour it in so completely that the full measure of his glory would be united for all eternity with our fragile nature – how can I think that I am in any way *worthy* of love so amazing, so divine?

And when this same God calls us to his table, where we encounter Jesus, not metaphorically, not for pretend, but in the full reality of his presence, where he offers us

his flesh, his blood, his life, to nourish our own life: how can I do anything but acknowledge that I am unworthy of this privilege?

And yet . . .

*Thou art the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy.*

When Simon says to Jesus, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man,” Jesus does not say, “Yeah, you’re right. You suck. I’m outta here.” Jesus doesn’t go away. He tells Simon to pull himself together, and then he calls Simon to even greater things.

When Isaiah says to God, “Woe is me,” God cauterizes his unclean lips and summons him to divine service.

*Thou art the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy.*

By the flesh broken and the blood poured, he has *made* us worthy to stand before him. Though in our error and sin and smallness we had no claim on him, God did not proceed by carefully weighing our merits. Instead, he has called us out of error into truth, out of sin into righteousness, out of death into life. He has touched our sinful lips with the holy gifts that come from his altar and made us partners in his own work.

The word ‘property’ is no longer used in the way that the author of the Prayer of Humble Access was using it. In that now obsolete sense, a ‘property’ is the distinguishing characteristic of a thing – what sets it apart from all other things, the one feature it has that stands out the most, so that when you recognize that feature, you know what you’re dealing with.

When you recognize mercy, you know you’re dealing with God. That’s what the Prayer is saying, at its very heart. When you recognize mercy, you know you’re dealing with God. Not when you recognize grandeur or awesomeness or fullness of being, though all those things are true of God too, but when you recognize mercy: that’s when you know you’re dealing with God.

And this is why acknowledging our unworthiness does not paralyze us. We are not trembling wretches, cowering in fear, hoping against hope that an angry God will relent just enough to grant us a mere crumb from his table. Not at all, for we know that the property of God is always to have mercy. And so, though we may fall to our knees like

Simon, we hop right back up and go with joy to meet our Lord in the sacrament of the altar. And that is why the Prayer continues:

*Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us.*

A priest of my acquaintance complained to me recently that Communion in the Episcopal Church had lost its mystery and meaning. “It’s just juice and cookies,” was how he put it. I didn’t really agree, but I could see what he meant. When we emphasize our right to come boldly unto the throne of grace – which I should acknowledge is every bit as Scriptural as this business about unworthiness and sinfulness – we can, if we’re not careful, turn the Eucharist into a sort of juice-and-cookies ritual for the sanctified set: vaguely reassuring, but certainly not earth-shattering. We can turn into a “Hey, Lord, what’s up? Nice to see ya” kind of church.

In his own way, the author of the Prayer of Humble Access realized this danger, and so he concludes by praying that our encounter with God will be a true Communion, that we will take our nourishment from the life of Jesus in such a way that we make our home with him and he with us.

In a few minutes, we will turn our attention to the altar. Jesus will be there whether we recognize him or not. He was present to the crowds that were pressing in on him on the shore of Lake Gennesaret, but it was only Peter who recognized Jesus for what he was – and, in so doing, recognized himself for what he was not. When we go forward to take our nourishment from the flesh and blood of Jesus, let us recognize that we are entering the awesome presence of God himself – no, more than that – that his awesome presence is entering us. And let us stand in awe of the audacious generosity of our redemption through Jesus Christ, to whom, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, be ascribed, as is most justly due, all might, dominion, majesty, and power, world without end. *Amen.*