Fourth Sunday before Lent

Isaiah 6.1-8
1 Corinthians 15.1-11
Luke 5.1-11

There is a thing people say about the selection process towards ordination that may or may not be true: that selection panels are suspicious of candidates who are maybe just a little *too* eager to be ordained. One gets the feeling that one ought to play hard to get.

There is, in any case, a related biblical trope that pops up again and again, and in fact in all three of our readings today:

Isaiah, son of Amoz is visited by angels, and he is immediately struck with intense humility, even unto self-abnegation. *I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips*, he says: and the angel blesses him before he receives his prophetic commission.

Likewise, Simon Peter witnesses this miracle, and bids Jesus depart from his unworthy presence—*go away, Lord, for I am a sinful man*—to which Jesus responds by giving him a new vocation.

St Paul too is at pains to remind the church in Corinth that he is unfit to be called an apostle, and is the least among them, because of his past sins: but that God has called him to apostolic ministry anyway.

There are still more examples besides of the unworthy or reluctant candidates, and not only for religious leadership but political leadership also, though the two are difficult to distinguish in the Bible. Abraham, informed that he will father a nation; Moses, called upon to lead Israel out of Egypt; Saul, to be anointed king: all expressed their own inadequacies. Given the dominance of this theme, it is no wonder that the Church is so keen for ordinands to demonstrate some humble reticence.

+++

This is a double-edged sword, this emphasis on humility. On one hand, it can lead to *false* humility, performed more than it is felt: and it is unclear whether this is worse than if humility is felt *too* keenly, which is also a kind of untruth.

On the other hand, this idea of humility—even *moral* humility—as a desirable trait is an important protest

against a culture in which self-promotion is now an essential professional skill. Despite the aforementioned rumour about the Church of England's selection criteria, what is even more salient to those of us who have been through the process is the pressure to talk ourselves up: to sell ourselves as capable and inspiring leaders, able to more-or-less single-handedly save the Church of England from precipitous decline, while also keeping our cassocks clean of any whiff of controversy.

So it turns out that the Church, although it preaches humility nevertheless—like many other institutions—selects for *ambition*, and this is a special kind of hypocrisy. The Church is not alone in this, of course. Except for the most rapacious corners of the corporate world, where greed is good and everyone is some kind of sociopathic narcissist, overt ambition is frowned upon as hubris: we are prone to want to cut down tall poppies, though I fear this may be driven by envy rather than moral principle.

And perhaps this just goes to show how difficult it is to strike a truthful balance between self-promotion and self-flagellation. This is a sad realisation: it is always sad when truthfulness proves difficult to achieve, and

dishonesty—whether to ourselves or to those tasked with evaluating us—seems the path of least resistance.

+++

What we are left with is uncertainty of our own goodness or worthiness, whether for any specific role —professional, priest, parent, spouse—or just in general, as human beings. We have capped feathers in one hand and barbed whips in the other, and we go back and forth in our own minds about which we deserve.

As Christians, we do have something to say about this, of course, as confused as our own HR departments might be. And something about what Christians have to say is contained in our readings today.

Christianity has always been quite sober about the human condition. The Bible opens with human cupidity and mendacity in Eden; and the theme of moral cowardice recurs over and over again, not least among God's chosen people Israel and its leaders, and still in the new Israel reconstituted around Jesus, his disciples, who end up abandoning him in darkness. We are a people of unclean lips; sinful men and women;

unfit for the calling to which we are nevertheless called.

The old language of "miserable offenders" and "there is no health in us" and "we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table" may be out of keeping with our sensibilities, who have been weaned on self-esteem: but there is no escaping from the fact that this is the Christian diagnosis of the human condition.

But not of human *nature* mind you, though the two are easy to mix up. Christians have always insisted that human beings are—as all created things are—by our nature good. Our moral condition is that of one failing to live up to what we are. Nor is moral depravity the Church's final analysis of our situation, certain radical Calvinists notwithstanding. As we hear in all three accounts this morning, God can and does make us good, make us worthy for the lives to which we are called.

Now, there is a certain kind of person who balks at the idea that we need God to make us good, as if we cannot make ourselves good. And this is fair enough, if one does not believe in God who made us and, at each

moment, sustains our existence. But it is a very odd opinion indeed to hold if one already accepts that we need God to *be*, let alone to be good.

Another way of understanding this is that by saying that God makes us good, Christians are saying that our goodness comes from *nowhere* in the world: this world in which the conferral of value by others is always partly self-interested, not to say selfish. Try as we might, and with the best of intentions, our praise of others is inevitably tinged with desire: whether for a favour or love and kindness reciprocated. Nor do we know how to make ourselves good by fiat. We sometimes talk as if this were possible, and certainly the authors of self-help books and motivational posters do, but we know deep inside that it's not: being the relational creatures that we are, we cannot have self-esteem that is not somehow externally validated.

And so, an angel touches our lips with coal, and the Son of God tells us not to be afraid, who knows all our faults and foibles and calls us anyway to the kind of life worthy of the name eternal. And this cannot be because God wants or needs anything for God's own sake, because God is just not the kind of thing that has

needs and desires of that creaturely kind. The value that God's love confers upon us can only be for us, and for one another, which amounts to the same thing after all.

Nor is our worthiness variable, as our feelings of self-esteem might be, ebbing and flowing as they do with our moods and circumstances; or as our social standings might be, tied as they are to the opinions of others, who try though they might, cannot help their fickleness as human minds are easily swayed.

The sobriety the Christian diagnosis of the human condition is thus keenly balanced with the bold, perhaps even ludicrous affirmation that God loves us into goodness. We are indeed a people of unclean lips: but we are forever made clean. We are indeed sinful men and women, unfit to even speak the name of the Saviour against whom we conspired unto death: but he has forever put his gospel in our hearts and in our mouths. Thanks be to God.