

Homily at Peter's First Mass - Preached by Anthony Fedell, OFM
August 27th 1972, 21st Sunday, A Cycle
At St Mary's Church in Hudson, NY
One day after his ordination there by Bishop Joseph Pernicone

First reading: Jeremiah 1:4-9 "To whomever I send you, you shall go; whatever I command you, you shall speak"
[from the rite of ordination of a presbyter, read by Jim Cranna, a parishioner of St. Mary's in Hudson, NY]

Responsorial Psalm: "Speak, Lord, I love to listen to your voice, see, Lord, here I am"

Second Reading: Romans 11:33-36 "How deep are the riches and wisdom and the knowledge of God."
[from the 21st Sunday, read by Ockle Johnson, one of Peter's students at St. Joseph's minor seminary in Callicoon, NY]

Gospel: Matthew 16:13-28 "You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God"
[from 21st Sunday, read by transitional deacon John Kostek, of Hudson, NY]

My brothers and sisters in the Lord, if in the future you want to recall just what has happened in the parish, here, this weekend, I can't think of a better way to do it than to reflect again in your own minds on those readings that we just heard.

We have in the first reading the call of Jeremiah. And, as with most people recorded in Scripture who were called by God for one work or another, he was very reluctant to accept. We find him saying, "Lord, I don't know how to speak, I'm too young, surely you don't want me, you need someone else."

We find Gideon, in the book of Judges, saying very much the same thing. The Lord calls him to save the Israelite people from attackers and he says, "Lord, my family is one of the lowest in the area, and not only that, I'm one of the most insignificant people in my family, surely you can do better than that."

But in both cases, the case of Jeremiah and Gideon, the Lord responded by saying: "I will be with you, I will tell you what to say; I will help you do what you have to do."

Moses was probably the person that resisted the fiercest and the longest. He began by simply being afraid and tried to hide himself. And when that didn't work and he finally did start talking to the Lord who had appeared to him, asking him to lead his people,

Moses said, "Well, who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and lead the Israelites out of Egypt? Nobody knows me." And the Lord said that He would be with him. So then he tries to plead ignorance. He said, "Well, suppose they ask me what is the name of the person who sent you? What am I going to tell them?" So the Lord told him what to say. So he tried another tack. He said, "But suppose they don't believe me, what if they won't listen, they might say, 'the Lord didn't appear to you.' What am I going to do then?" And the Lord said, "I will give you signs to prove to the people that you speak for me."

So in desperation he said, "If you please, Lord, I have never been eloquent, I haven't been eloquent in the past, I am not eloquent even now that you are talking to me, I am slow of speech, I'm dumb, I won't be of any use to you." But the Lord kept resisting. Finally, in pure cowardice, Moses said, "If you please, Lord, send someone else."

But he would not listen, the Lord would not, to Moses' reluctance, and of course we know the great things Moses was able to do, once he surrendered to the power of the Lord in his life, realizing that it was the Lord's work he was doing and not his own, and that it was the Lord's strength that he was going to use to accomplish that work.

So it was with Jeremiah. So it is with Fr. Peter. I'm sure the thought has passed through his mind that surely there are other men who would be better suited for this than I. And yet he has surrendered to the Lord. He has said, with Peter in the Gospel today, "Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of the loving God, and I'm going to let you work your wonders in my life."

Why was Peter chosen? Why, of all the people of the city of Hudson, of Columbia County, of the state of New York, is Peter standing before you today? Why is any one of us chosen to do anything in this world?

Well, if you want the answer to that you will have to go to the second reading, the short little passage from the letter to the Romans. And the answer is "WHO KNOWS?"

Who knows the unsearchable wisdom of God? Who has ever been the Lord's counselor? Who has ever told the Lord what to do? Or who has ever given Him anything so as to expect something back in return?

The Lord doesn't owe any one of us anything. And that's the mystery of it all. But it's also, in a way, the excitement of it all. Because the only answer you can give to why anyone is chosen is that **it Pleased God to do so**. And that's a thrilling thought, that it pleased God.

It means that everything in the world is certainly very meaningful, but **not necessary**. It's simply because it pleases God. That means that the world is a kind of divine "lark," if you will; or a game or dance into which we all have been invited. It should give us great joy, and great enthusiasm for living that life as fully as we can.

So, having decided that, that we can't really say why Peter was called, we have to ask one final question, and that is, "What has he been called to do?"

Perhaps there was a day when some people would answer that he has been called to share in something which carries with it great privilege, in terms of the acceptance which he will get from people because of his office as priest. But a lot of that has certainly diminished, these days, that is, the respect, you might say, for a priest simply because we are priests.

One story that always comes to mind in that regard, is the story of the priest who had just been assigned as pastor in the town. He was new in town. He was driving down the street one day, and his foot was a little heavy on the accelerator, and a policeman pulled him over. So the priest rolled down the window and said, "Apparently you don't know, I'm Father Fox (his name was Fr. Albert Fox). And the policeman said, "I don't care if you're Mother Goose, you're still getting a ticket."

So the idea of automatic acceptance or privilege that priesthood used to carry is at least diminishing. Or the idea that the priest has got to have all the answers. We certainly know that doesn't hold much water any more either. Like the priest who once said, "You know, I consider my brain, my intelligence, my wisdom to be my whole fortune." And a friend said, "Don't worry about it. Poverty is no disgrace." So that can't be the answer.

I think that what Peter has been called to do is first of all to BEHOLD. In other words, simply to sharpen his eyes to the vision of the people and the things around him. And to hear more clearly that they are all calling out to him, in their need or in their beauty. His prayer has been, "Lord, that I may see!" and I think he has been given a sharpening of that vision in the gift of the priesthood. So that he can begin to see all the world and everything that is in it as a gift from the Lord.

Once he has seen, then he has been invited to LIFT UP, to raise up, to hold up everything in the world in one simultaneous gesture of wonder and thanksgiving. Perhaps the most significant role of a priest, if you will, is that, I think, of lifting up; the way a mother lifts an infant to her breast, or a child lifts a toy or a sea shell and is thrilled by it, or a farmer lifts wheat from the ground and is part of that process which eventually turns it into bread for living bodies.

To lift up, to lift people up when they are down, to try to revive their drooping spirits, to lift them up out of the waters of Baptism into new life; to lift them up out of the mire of sin and give them the pardon of God; to lift up the bread and wine at the altar, and then to lift up the Body and Blood of Christ. And to remind each of us that we not only come to receive Holy Communion, we are supposed to try to **be** a holy communion of people, so he invites us to lift up our hands toward one another in a sign of peace.

He is to be a leader of our community, trying to show us the way to give proper thanks to God for all that God has done for us. And it will involve pain, because the Son of Man was lifted up on a cross before he was raised up by his Father in resurrection. And yet, as a priest, Peter will begin to try to bring friends together, to bring the Lord, who has always been trying to reason with his people about how much he loves them, to bring the Lord closer to them, and them closer to him.

So we all rejoice today in this great mission, in this great charge that Peter has received. I congratulate him, his family, all his friends who are here. And I think we must offer him our continued support, as he tries to go on to teach, to baptize, to forgive, and bless. He needs our prayers, he needs our love.

And we should remember too that he is reminding each of us here today that somehow we are all called to be priests; to behold, to lift up, to intercede. We all must do that in our own way. And we should thank the Lord for the call He has given each one here. With that, I want to close by reading the very last two lines of that second reading that we heard already. But I would like you to listen to it again, because I think it sums up everything that is taking place here today.

"From you, O Lord, and through you and for you all things are."

That's the first statement, and it's a statement of fact. What do we provide? Simply this, and that's the second statement:

"To God be glory forever. Amen."