

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR C

First Reading Isaiah 6: 1–8

Last week, we read the events surrounding the call of Jeremiah to be a prophet. This week we are praying with Isaiah's call.

Isaiah was probably born to an aristocratic family familiar with the king's court. He lived during a very troubled period where Assyria was trying to expand its borders, and when the northern kingdom of Israel was attempting to coerce the southern kingdom of Judah – Isaiah's home – to join them in the fight against Assyria and Egypt.

Although the text recounts a vision, it is nonetheless very anchored in historical times. King Uzziah has died. This enables scholars to date the event fairly accurately, probably at 742 BC – the time of the prophets Amos and Hosea. Uzziah himself reigned for 40 years and is remembered for bringing prosperity to his country through agricultural reforms and a strong army.

The scene described here takes place in the Temple, the place where ancient Jews believed God dwelt on earth. Although it is the largest building around, the train of the Lord fills the whole sanctuary.

The Lord is imagined surrounded by a heavenly court of advisors and seraphs, heavenly six-winged creatures singing his praises. Their song gives us the beginning of the 'Holy, holy ...' which we pray during Mass as the Sanctus. The three-fold repetition of the word indicates the absolute quality of God: all aspects of him are holy.

Isaiah's description of his surroundings makes use of all the senses: vision, hearing, smell and touch, and we can perhaps also imagine the taste of the coal on his mouth. All these elements attest to God's presence. His greatness contrasts both with that of Isaiah and with the inadequate presence of the people of Judah.

Having seen the Lord, Isaiah knows that 'a man cannot see [him] and live' (Exodus 33: 20). But the Lord is full of compassion and takes the initiative, purifying him from his sins.

Having been cleansed, Isaiah can now answer the Lord's call.

Gospel Luke 5: 1–11

Jesus was standing one day by the Lake of Gennesaret ...

The Lake of Gennesaret is also known as the Sea of Galilee or the Sea of Tiberias. It is thirteen miles long by eight miles wide, and 680 feet below sea level, which gives it an almost tropical climate. During the time of Jesus it had nine townships along its shores and a population of 15,000.

Gennesaret is really the name of the plain on the west side of the lake, which is a very fertile piece of land.

This is a beautiful place, its name deriving from 'gan', meaning a garden, and 'sar', a prince, hence the 'prince of gardens'; or alternatively 'gan' with 'asher', meaning riches, hence the 'garden of riches'.

The crowds pressed in upon him to listen to the word of God

Prior to this event Jesus, had been preaching in the synagogue. He will return there, but at this time the lakeside is his church and a boat is his pulpit. Jesus ministers on the open road and anywhere where people come to listen to him.

'Put out into deep water and pay out your nets for a catch.'

Scholars see in this story an example of what is needed for a miracle to take place: the trust to go a 'little deeper' in order to see God's provision which is always there.

'We have worked all night long but have caught nothing.'

The disciples were convinced that there was nothing left to fill their nets. The Sea of Galilee held huge shoals of fish, enough to cover up to an acre of the surface of the sea. Jesus knew what the sea held.

'Yet, if you say so.'

Simon, an experienced fisherman, was exhausted, and although the circumstances for fishing were now unfavourable, he was prepared to listen to Jesus and to obey him, calling him Master. In trust, he will make an effort and even attempt the seemingly impossible.

As the miracle takes place, Simon becomes Simon Peter, acknowledges his human weakness, and now calls Jesus, 'Lord'.

