

**A sermon preached at St Andrew's Church, Soham on the 4th Sunday before Lent 2019. Is 6: 1-8; Ps 138; Lk 5:1-11,
by the Revd. Eleanor Whalley**

May I speak and may we hear in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

A friend of mine who's also a vicar

is very good at sending himself up – he's good at telling stories against himself.

I remember one day, him telling a group of us

he'd just been to see

one of his most hard to please parishioners.

He'd sat himself where he'd be told to sit,

and she looked him up and down, disapprovingly.

'I saw you in Tesco the other day', she barked. 'You were shouting at your children.'

It wasn't the best start to a visit.

Higher up the clerical food chain,

Alex Hughes, the Archdeacon of Cambridge, began a talk to some of us clergy a few years ago

with a quote from the present Archbishop of Canterbury.

'When people see me,' said Justin Welby, 'they see the Archbishop of Canterbury.'

When I look in the mirror, I see Justin Welby.'

Alex went on to apply that to himself –

'People see the Archdeacon of Cambridge; I look in the mirror and I see Alex Hughes' –

How people see us

doesn't always match what we know to be reality.

For many people, particularly those of us in leadership -

there's a difference between the public image and the private persona.

We'd rather the moments

when we do the equivalent of shouting at our children

are moments people don't see.

We'd rather keep those moments private, and – to a certain extent, that is as it should be.

Today's Gospel and today's first reading

record moments when what is private becomes public:

moments of revelation; moments of confession.

Isaiah, I imagine, wouldn't have been on his own in the temple.

The temple would have been a bigger and better Jewish equivalent of somewhere like Ely Cathedral – there'd've been people on duty, ministers in attendance, visitors coming to pray - a mishmash of humanity coming and going all the time.

Maybe other people heard what Isaiah said –

Maybe they heard his admission of what he saw in the mirror:

'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips'.

In the temple, Isaiah encountered God, in all God's splendour and majesty.

In the face of perfection,

he knew himself and his people to be but dust.

In today's Gospel, Peter's experience is similar.

He finds himself awestruck – terrified – by the man he realises is God:

'Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man'.

The contrast between Peter and Jesus could not be more stark.

Peter is humiliated in the truest sense of the word –

He knows himself to be imperfect - of the earth –

'the work of God's hands', in the words of the psalm the choir sang to us just now.

And it's not just Jesus who's there to hear that truth.

Peter and Jesus are in a boat;

Andrew, Peter's brother and business partner, is there with them.

And because, after the catch, the nets are so heavy,

they have to call James and John to help bring them in.

Andrew, James and John could - no doubt - have said exactly what Peter said:

'I am a sinful man'.

30 years later, Paul would tell it how it is:

'All have sinned, and fallen short of the glory of God'.

At the end of the day, we're all in the same boat –

literally, in Andrew and Peter's case -

An encounter with Jesus reveals that.

What is encouraging, at least to me,

is that Peter's admission of state of his soul

doesn't affect his calling.

If anything, it turns out to be what permits it:

'Do not be afraid:' says Jesus, 'From now on you will be catching people'.

Christ calls Peter to work with him, just as God calls Isaiah,

And where Peter goes, Andrews, James and John go too –

they get to shore, leave everything, and follow Jesus.

To follow is not to rely on your own strength.

To follow is to allow someone else to guide you –

It's to put your trust not in your own strength, but in someone else's;

It's letting go, and letting someone else lead.

Peter, knowing his own frailty,

is content to let Christ lead the way.

Peter's admission

of what the Church would call his sinfulness –

is the gateway to all that will follow.

It's the same with Isaiah.

It's only when Isaiah has admitted who he really is – what he's really like –

that God steps in.

A seraph flies down with a coal to touch his mouth.

God's action prepares Isaiah for mission.

Isaiah finds a new confidence:

'Here I am, send me'.

Isaiah can move forward –

not in his own strength,

but in the strength of God, upon whom he knows he must rely.

Fast forward to today,
and there's a time and a place for speaking our own truth.
There are occasions when silence is golden.
But the message of today's readings
is that once we've had the courage to acknowledge reality -
even if only to ourselves and to God -
God can begin to work with us.

Nothing we confess will be news to God –
God knows us better than we know ourselves.
And instead of being put off by what we say,
God will begin to use us.

God will use us in the company of one another –
In the company of all those who know their need of God,
those who are prepared to let God lead the way.
Those who trust in God's forgiveness
for ourselves, and for one another.
Those who commit to meting out
that same forgiveness, so as to allow a new start.
Those who are resolved,
like Peter,
to fix their eyes on Jesus –
so as to learn,
and to follow.

May it be so.

Amen.