

## Sermon for 7 February 2010 Epiphany 5 C – St. Francis

One of the great gifts of the 1982 Hymnal was the inclusion of the hymn, Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing. For those who grew up in other denominations, this may be hard to imagine but I never heard that hymn until late in the 1980's since it was not in the Episcopal hymnal from which I sang as a child, teen and young adult. When I first heard it I found the hymn absolutely arresting, and its tune Nettleton haunting.

Robert Robinson, an 18<sup>th</sup> century English preacher and the author of this poem, uses powerful imagery and striking juxtaposition to convey the power of sin and the wonderment of grace. Given his young age of 22 when he penned these words, I was amazed by the volumes he speaks in these 3 verses contained in our current hymnal. His own story reveals why these words contain such power. Robinson's father died when the author was only 10 years old. At age 14, Robinson's mother sent him to London to learn the trade of barber in order to support himself. By age 17 he had fallen in with the proverbial "wrong crowd" and lived a life filled with drink and debauchery. During one night of drunken revelry he and his companions succeeded in getting a fortune teller drunk and then convinced her to tell their fortunes. Pointing a finger at Robinson she predicted he would live to see children and grandchildren - a long life on which he had not planned. Frightened by this prediction he convinced his friends to come with him to see the prominent evangelistic preacher George Whitefield under the ruse that they would go and laugh at him and his Methodist followers. Instead of laughing Robinson experienced a powerful conversion that led him to become a Methodist preacher by the age of 20. Two years into ordained ministry he wrote: "prone to wander Lord, I feel it prone to leave the God I love". The pathos and plea of those lines remain palpable to many who continue to strive to faithfully follow God.

I suspect that Isaiah, Peter and Paul each of whose own call to grace we heard in today's readings would understand well Robinson's plea of "here's my heart, oh take and seal it, seal it for thy courts above." Robinson's story in addition to Isaiah, Paul, and Peter's reminds us that God's presence is always around us waiting to break into our consciousness and to call us into service. We may, like Paul, firmly believe that we are already serving God by insisting on how others should live only to find God breaking into our misguided paths and showing us God's true way. We may, like Peter, just be "doing our job" only to learn that God's abundance as we follow that Divine path exceeds anything we have ever achieved on our own. Yet it is Isaiah who regularly guides our way as we gather to worship week after week, and seek to battle the urge to wander off God's path.

“Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh” the Hebrew’s cry, “Holy, Holy, Holy” we cry. The hymn of the heavenly courts is our hymn as we gather around the altar praying to enter into that same Divine throne room in which Isaiah found himself transported as he prayed in the Temple. But do we seriously believe that we too are in that throne room where the hem of God’s robe fills the room and billowing smoke wreaths all around us? I suspect that many here today are more silently focused on the football game tonight than the possibility that God is ready to break into our presence. But if we really believe as we pray we should, as Annie Dillard warns us: go to church wearing crash helmets, receive life preservers and be lashed to the pews in case God shows up.” God’s grace is as abundant as “the streams of mercy never ceasing” we sing about in Robinson’s hymn, and as bountiful as Peter’s catch of fish that almost sinks 2 fishing boats trying to bring that net laden with fish to shore. But we must also realize that if we dare to speak God’s words, if we risk doing God’s work, we need to speak through scorched lips, lips touched by that burning purifying coal that touched Isaiah’s.

So today I challenge each of us to enter our Eucharistic prayer with minds filled with expectation, hearts overflowing with hopes of hearing and eyes open for the presence of God in our midst. Only then can we truly hear the call those disciple fishermen heard on the shore of the Sea of Galilee as Jesus calls each one of us to “follow me”. Only then will we fully live as we proclaim: Find the lost; Heal the broken; and Celebrate God’s love for all.