

All three readings today are about – or at least have the theme of – unworthiness.

In the first reading from Isaiah, the prophet says that he is ‘a man of unclean lips’ who lives ‘among an unclean people’ – and he clearly doesn’t consider himself worthy of being a messenger of the Lord.

In the second reading, St Paul, equally clearly, doesn’t think he is worthy to be called an apostle; he says: ‘I am the least of the apostles; in fact, since I persecuted the Church of God, I hardly deserve the name apostle.’

And in the gospel, overwhelmed by the great catch of fish, Simon Peter says: ‘Leave me, Lord; I am a sinful man.’

In every case, central to the reading is feeling of uncleanness, unworthiness, sinfulness. However, in every case, too, the divine response to human unworthiness is: ‘*Nevertheless*’. Isaiah, St Paul and St Peter are then each given their own particular work to do for the Lord.

God neither wants nor needs our worthiness – that was the problem with the Pharisees, who thought they *were* worthy and righteous in his sight. God does not want our cleverness or our virtue or our strength or courage or capability – whatever of those we have might be useful, but they are not essential. All he truly wants is a loving heart. And that is one of the greatest gifts of all – and often a rare one.

To have a loving heart means having a perfect heart but not being perfect. Most of us would think of ‘perfection’ in terms of ‘sinlessness’, or being without fault or flaw, or being a

saint, or praying all day and never having a cynical, cruel, jealous or dirty thought in our lives – but none of this is perfection. It doesn't mean any of that. Perfection comes from the Latin 'perfectus', which means 'whole'. Perfection means not lacking anything – any part or any quality – it means complete, entire and whole. An unopened box of chocolates could be said to be perfect – but once it's been opened and half-a-dozen chocolates have been scoffed, it is no longer perfect because it is not complete.

If we exclude someone from our kindness, then our kindness is not perfect because it is not complete – there is something – someone – missing from it.

When Jesus tells us to be perfect, just as God our Father in heaven is perfect, he also tells us what perfection means: treating everyone equally, regardless of who they are. Not being sinless, with neither fault nor flaw, but treating everyone equally. Because that's exactly what God does.

If we exclude someone from our love, then our love is imperfect because it is not complete, it is not whole.

Love arises in our heart when we have no barrier between ourselves and another, when we meet and encounter others without wanting to pass judgement on them. A loving heart is healing, which is why the heart of Christ, which was the embodiment of divine love, was an irresistible magnet for hearts that were broken, wayward, dry, impoverished and damaged. A loving heart speaks eloquently to other hearts –

it can say more to them than all our intelligence and knowledge and learning.

Most of the time we may not feel worthy of God's love – or of much else either, come to that – but God's reply is always: 'Nevertheless.' Worthiness is not needed: a loving heart is.