

Sermon for 6th February 2022, Proper I, Accession of Queen Elizabeth II

Preached at Smarden (Benefice Eucharist)

Isaiah 6:1-8; Luke 5:1-11

Sermon

Ten years ago, back in the spring of 2012, when the rest of the country were getting excited about the build-up to the London Olympics, I was living in relative seclusion in the Benedictine Abbey at West Malling, where I was a novice nun. Not for me the great spectacle of the opening ceremony, or watching Mo Farah celebrate his middle-distance victories, but rather getting up at 4am to pray in the abbey church with all the other sisters shrouded in rustling black habits.

Now, you may well wonder how a person ends up trying a vocation as a nun or a monk. And if you *are* wondering that, you'll be pleased to hear that I have numerous nun-stories to share about my experiences, which you'll no doubt hear in many sermons to come! But for now, I'll just say that the reason I gave up my career in IT and financial analysis was a sudden and overwhelming experience of God's love for me while I was on my knees in prayer. To be honest, I wasn't actually on my knees – I was sitting comfortably in bed, but that doesn't matter; what was important was that one moment I didn't believe that God could possibly love a person like me, selfish and sinful, and then the next moment I knew in every fibre of my being that I was utterly loved by God, just as I am.

This wasn't just a mental realisation, it was a physical experience, ecstatic, overwhelming. I was left in awe. This is what encounters with God tend to do. The reality of God is not only beyond everything we imagine God to be, but also beyond anything we *can* imagine.

You may now be starting to see what our two bible readings today have in common, and why they've been so carefully selected in the Lectionary for the same Sunday. Both Isaiah and Simon Peter experience the overwhelming divine presence that changes their lives.

In Isaiah's vision, even the hem of God's clothing is so voluminous that it fills the entirety of King Solomon's ancient Jewish temple. And the mysterious seraphim with six wings are calling out to each other declaring the holiness of God, not once, not twice, but thrice Holy – an unprecedented amount of holiness! These days we say or sing the words 'holy, holy, holy' without truly realising how dramatic this is. In Jewish literature, to say a word *twice* meant putting a huge emphasis on it. "‘verily, verily’ or ‘truly, truly’ I say to you," Jesus often begins his teaching. But *three times* holy – that's the sort of overwhelming experience that causes people to spend their lives on building glorious churches like this one, or to give up everything they have for the sake of Jesus.

Simon, too, encounters the unexpected glory of God's presence. He was exhausted after a long day fishing, he was cleaning the nets, ready to go home, and when Jesus suggested he start all over again, he almost told him where to go! But when he does finally agree to fish one more time, there are so many fish that the nets almost break. The miracle opens his eyes to the glory of God right there before him.

To experience God's presence is to be overwhelmed by awe, but when we experience God's loving attention directed at us personally, humble human beings that we are, then we cannot help but be transformed. All our priorities are upended. Things that once seemed absolutely vital, now seem irrelevant. If God is so real, and if we become aware of God's attention on us (as it always is), what can we do but sink to our knees like Isaiah and Simon and declare our unworthiness?

“Woe is me,” says Isaiah. “I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips!”

“Go away from me, Lord,” says Simon Peter, “for I am a sinful man!”

Two thousand years later, I had the same reaction, and perhaps you have too. Surely God doesn't hear *my* prayers! Surely *I'm* not worthy of God's love! I even thought that perhaps by being a nun, I could at least look holy on the outside, even if I wasn't holy on the inside. But God never lets us beat ourselves up for not being good enough.

Immediately, an angel seraph flies to Isaiah, touches his lips with a hot coal and tells him his guilt has departed and his sins are blotted out.

Immediately, Jesus tells Simon Peter, “Do not be afraid”.

Immediately, when I cried out to God with fear that he couldn't possibly love me, God said “How can you hate yourself when I love you so much?”

This always seems to be how God calls people into his community of love, into his family. First there is the sudden awareness of God's overwhelming presence. Then there is the fear and sense of unworthiness. Then the reassurance and tenderness, and the unconditional welcome that bids us let go of all our anxieties and let ourselves be loved as we are.

Do you recall the poem ‘Love’ by George Herbert?

*Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
If I lacked any thing.
A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:
Love said, You shall be he.
I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,
I cannot look on thee.*

*Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?
Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?
My dear, then I will serve.
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.*

The whole Christian message is in this poem, and the whole Christian experience. God's unexpected, undeserved, overpowering love heals us, and makes us whole. This is why when God asks, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Isaiah immediately replies, "Here am I; send me!" And when Jesus says to Peter, James and John, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people," they immediately leave everything, including that miraculous catch of fish, and follow him. They have found something worth giving up everything else for.

And two thousand years later, people like us are still encountering God's love and having our lives changed. This is just what happens when you meet God. We could be walking in the woods, suddenly struck by the beauty of the trees, or looking up at the clear night sky and seeing the majesty of the infinite heavens. Or we encounter God in the mystery of the communion wafer, the body of Christ, or in the solitude of prayer.

You may soon realise that I have no other sermon than this. I left West Malling Abbey and trained to be a vicar so that I could preach it. I hope it's a good one! Here am I. Sent to you. Let's seek God's love together, with all our heart and mind and strength. Amen.