



Christ Church Cathedral

OXFORD

7 June 2020: Matins Sermon

Trinity Sunday

Isaiah 6:1–8

The Revd Philippa White, Succentor, Assistant College Chaplain, and School Chaplain

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

*'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.'*

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!'

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: 'Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.' Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!'

It's hard to keep track of the days, in lockdown – let alone the changing seasons of the church's year. When all our external markers seem to have disappeared, when the days are long but the weeks can sometimes flash by and sometimes drag at a painful snail's pace – when, as the joke doing the rounds on social media put it, February this year had 29 days, March 31, April 50 and May 392.

But whether we are ready for it or not, this is Trinity Sunday – the first Sunday of ordinary time, and the day when the church’s year directs us to think about who God is and what God is like.

That’s a tricky proposition at the best of times – you may have encountered the annual teasing-but-deadly-serious conversations between clergy and other preachers about who is going to draw the short straw and have to preach on Trinity Sunday. But this year, it feels almost impossible. In the year that we’re having – in the week that we’ve just had – in the context of so much pain and difficulty, of isolation, loneliness and illness, of grief and loss, of pandemic and of protests, of plummeting confidence in government, increasing anxiety about racism and untold other difficulties that are shaping 2020 into the worst year for quite some time – the church wants me to preach about the abstract nature of God?

But I think the nature of God isn’t abstract. We – all human beings – are made in the image of God, as Genesis 1:26 tells us – so questions about the nature of God are also about human nature, about how we are made and how we are called to become more like God. Preaching about the nature of God – learning more about who God is – helps us to understand who we are and what God asks of us. And that’s work we need to do more now than ever.

So with that in mind, let’s think about Isaiah 6:1-8. This is one of my favourite passages from the Bible – like many of my favourite passages, it’s a vision of God. Isaiah – already a prophet – is in the temple and suddenly sees something beyond what’s physically there. God. God in glory, God in mystery, God who is beyond what Isaiah’s eyes can see or comprehend – but God who is certainly not abstract. In God’s throne room, Isaiah’s experience is a physical one – he sees God, not as a set of abstract propositions, but as a Presence of glory, of personality, and of calling.

The fashion for preachers on Trinity Sunday used – maybe twenty years ago, maybe only ten – to be to use metaphors and analogies to say what God as Trinity is like. That was fine, as far as it went; but the trouble with analogies is that you tend to focus on the

abstract propositions, on the way that your metaphor – whether it's the skin, flesh and pips of an apple, or the water, ice and steam in which H₂O exists, or the way that I am simultaneously priest, mother, and wife – falls short of describing exactly what God's like. Once you start doing that, you've lost all sense of mystery and you haven't said anything very useful at all.

So the pendulum has, I think, swung. The fashion for sermons on Trinity Sunday is now to talk about the unknowability of God. Mysterious, ineffable, beyond comprehension. We've gone back to the Athanasian Creed: the Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, the Holy Spirit incomprehensible, yet not three incomprehensibles but one incomprehensible... which is fine as far as it goes, but a bit, well, incomprehensible. And the danger with all that focus on the incomprehensible is that you imply this is all about the abstract nature of God, without commenting on why this needs to change us.

Isaiah's vision can help because it holds both glory and mystery. The God whom Isaiah sees is certainly incomprehensible – in the old sense that he cannot be contained, cannot be compassed by Isaiah's vision. There is mystery, but there is also glory. There is the unseen but also the seen. The house was filled with smoke, but also, Isaiah saw the Lord.

And that seeing was a commissioning. When Isaiah saw the Lord, that vision of mystery and glory wasn't for himself alone. Nor was it a single occasion with no impact on the rest of his life. Seeing the Lord – in mystery and glory, in Threeness and oneness – was a call. When he saw the Lord, Isaiah realised his own sin and the sin of the society he lived in – I am a man of unclean lips, I live among a people of unclean lips. He realised he needed to repent and be forgiven. And he realised that God had a task for him.

This passage has been associated with the idea of God as Trinity and read on this Trinity Sunday for a long time – largely because of the tripleness of the angels singing Holy, holy, holy. But the idea of God as Trinity isn't often linked with the reading in Isaiah's own context. Yet in the scene, and for Isaiah for whom this was the foundational event of his life, the vision of God and the call of God are inextricably linked. It is seeing God – God in glory and mystery – which makes Isaiah realise who he is – a sinful man, in a sinful society

– and what he is called to do – shout God’s glory, God’s mystery, God’s justice into that society. Proclaim God’s condemnation on acts of pride and arrogance, oppression and violence, on greed that ignores and disregards those it tramples underfoot.

So on this Trinity Sunday, at the end of a week when protests have highlighted the sinfulness in our human societies – racism, prejudice, violence and brutality – I think we hear this passage in a very particular way. Yes, Trinity Sunday teaches us that God is three and one. Yes, Isaiah’s vision teaches us that God is glorious. But Isaiah’s vision also teaches us that the better we know God, the more we see of God, the more clearly we will see ourselves and our world and the better we can respond to God’s call.

For Trinity Sunday isn’t just about knowing more about God – when we know more who God is, we become more aware of the ways that we fall short. If we think we know God but have not been shocked and appalled by the institutional racism that’s been brought into the spotlight this week, then we need to look again. We worship a God who is beyond our imaginations, a God who made all people, a God to whom black lives matter. We worship a God who calls his prophets to repentance before sending them out to preach: who brought Isaiah to realise, first, his own sin; second, the institutional sin of his people; and only thirdly his call to take God’s message to those people, convincing them that they too needed to repent and change their ways.

On this Trinity Sunday, I’m praying that, like Isaiah, I would see a new vision of God. That, like Isaiah, I would realise what I need to repent of; that, like Isaiah, God would blot out my guilt and make me new; and that, like Isaiah, God would give me the words to make our world a more just and equal one. May that be the prayer of each of us, and may God work with us to bring repentance, healing and hope to this and every nation.