

**Church of the Ascension, Hilton
4 February 2007**

**God's Call – Our Response:
Partners with God**

Nic Denny-Dimitriou

READINGS:

Isaiah 6:1-8

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Luke 5:1-11

God Calls Isaiah to be a Prophet

The Resurrection of Christ

Jesus Calls the First Disciples

OPENING SENTENCES:

From Isaiah 6:3:

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory."

From Psalm 138 (using these verses now instead of reading them later)

"I give you thanks, Lord, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise; I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness; for you have exalted your name and your word above everything."

Sermon

Generally speaking, we are not here to worship what we do not know. Instead, we worship God according to the knowledge we have: knowledge about God, and the more personal form of knowledge that comes from direct experience of God.

In our knowledge about God, and experience of God, it sometimes seems as if we are continually moving along on an axis between being overwhelmed by the awe and majesty of God before which we fall silent, and the informality of casual repartee with an intimate friend. In the light of Scripture, and experience of worship and prayer, both seem valid.

But today's scripture readings highlight the awesome-ness of direct encounter with God, and I have wrestled with 3 or 4 different ways of preaching on them today – thankfully you will get only one of them!

Isaiah had a vision of God while he was in the temple. We don't know if Isaiah was alone or whether it was a public gathering for worship. Whichever it was, Isaiah had a vision of God. He says, "I saw the Lord." He struggles to describe what he saw. It's always hard to describe the indescribable. Clearly one of the things that struck him was how different God was from us. He speaks of God as being high and lifted-up and enormous. Isaiah was in the temple, the biggest building of its day, but when he saw the Lord it was as though no more than the cuff of God's sleeve could fit in the temple. If he'd had the vision today he might have said that the cuff of God's sleeve filled Kingsmead Stadium!

And around God were awesome fiery creatures called Seraphim, a Hebrew name for heavenly creatures; we usually just use the word "angels". They called out constantly, "Holy! Holy! Holy is the Lord who rules over everything. The whole earth is full of God's glory."

The vision of God didn't seem to be confined to the Temple where Isaiah was. God's glory couldn't fit in the temple and the vision spilled out to fill the whole earth with God's glory. This kind of vision is not an everyday experience. You can't make it happen; it is a gift of self-revelation from God. All you can do is help to make it possible, by ensuring that you'd be ready for it if God offered you the gift.

The impact of this vision on Isaiah is about as user friendly as a freight train coming through your lounge wall. At first he feels like he's in an earthquake. The whole building begins to shake and fill with smoke. And an earthquake would be welcome at that moment, because Isaiah feels like he wants the ground to open up and swallow him. He is overcome by the awesomeness of God which fills the whole earth and makes the ground shake beneath him. Isaiah falls down thinking that he's going to die.

Coming face to face with this awesome God and hearing the cries of holiness from the Seraphim, Isaiah feels like he's standing naked and exposed. He is suddenly horribly aware of all sorts of things he doesn't like about himself. Everything that he previously thought was worthwhile and important suddenly seems like scum. As he said on another occasion, even his righteous deeds seemed like filthy rags.

And feeling painfully aware of his own imperfection in the presence of such awesome holiness, he feels as though he's walked naked into a blazing furnace from which he cannot possibly emerge alive. "I'm finished," he says, "I can't open my mouth without exposing myself as a sinner, and the same is true of everyone I know; yet here I am, naked before the all-consuming holiness of the Lord!"

But he does survive. He survives by the gift of God. God sends one of the Seraphim to take a live coal from the altar and touch Isaiah's lips. Having faced his own sinfulness, Isaiah is now faced with the even more awesome prospect of forgiveness. "Isaiah, your guilt has gone. Your sin is blotted out." This is not the user friendly, "hey, don't worry about it, it will be okay," kind of thing. This is being dropped into the abyss and snatched back out just as your scream reached bloodcurdling.

Having been touched by the burning coal of forgiveness, Isaiah now hears the Lord speak for the first time. Maybe he heard more than we're told, but the crucial bit is a question: "Whom shall I send? Is there someone who will go on our behalf?"

And Isaiah responds to the word of the Lord by offering himself: "Here am I. Send me!" And so the Lord commissions Isaiah for his task as a preacher and prophet, to preach to a people many of whom will stubbornly refuse to hear even though God is also warning of a coming destruction of Israel if they continue to ignore God's ways.

How does this affect the pattern of what we do here each Sunday? We approach the God who is the most tremendous mystery, the God who is beyond what we can envisage or describe, the God who is surrounded by cries of, "Holy! Holy! Holy Lord! God of truth and light; heaven and earth are full of God's glory."

And as we approach we become aware of how far we fall short of the awesome holiness of the God who searches us and knows us. In the face of what seems like a consuming fire, all we can do is cry "We confess that we have sinned. Lord, have mercy!"

We hear words like those of the Seraph, "Your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out. You are forgiven." And it is then, as a forgiven people who have been touched by the purifying fire of God, that we are able to hear the Word of God. The scriptures are read and proclaimed to us, and the vision they proclaim always begs the questions, "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?"

So we respond by offering ourselves. With bread and wine as tokens of our gifts of ourselves, we gather around the table in thanksgiving to become what we receive - the body of Christ. And as the body of Christ we are sent out into the world to proclaim the good news of God's love and forgiveness.

We are sent out knowing that that proclamation may well fall on deaf ears, but we are to be faithful in proclaiming it nevertheless. Isaiah lived that story, and we re-enact it each week so that we might be drawn into it and live it too.

We heard today how Peter went through much the same experience when he first encountered Jesus. When he got a glimpse of who Jesus was – and let's remember he was going about his ordinary day-to-day fishing business – he fell to his knees and begged Jesus to get out of his life: “Go away, Lord, for I am a sinful man.”

Like Isaiah, perhaps he also felt that if he got too close, the holiness would consume him alive. But he too was touched by the word of promise and he left everything to follow Jesus and to proclaim the good news of God's love and forgiveness.

Our responses to that may include fear: “They left all to follow...” are frightening words. Yet Jesus did not call ALL people of that time to drop their activity or work – only those twelve in that particular way. He DID call ALL to choose to be part of God's Kingdom, to align themselves with the Kingdom of God.

Let me end with some encouragement from the NT reading about Paul:

We hear Paul declaring the Good News of God in Jesus Christ and indicating what God's grace has accomplished in him. He described himself as “the least” partly because of his past in which he persecuted the early followers of Christ until the Risen Jesus personally confronted him and his life was transformed. Paul declares that God's grace in his life has not been in vain.

He notes that being a disciple of Jesus Christ is rooted in the resurrection, and he mentions the appearances of the Risen Christ several times. Paul invites us, through his letter to the Corinthians, to take up the discipleship journey and to be faithful followers of the risen Christ. It is in that encounter that we find we are loved and forgiven and are transformed into the hands and feet of God in the world.

We are called to participate with God in God's purposes, to declare the glory of God, to declare the things of God to all.

God has called us into partnership:

- Like the old business sign: “John Smith & Sons”
- This one would say something like “God of Heaven and Earth & Daughters & Sons” – (OK, too clumsy for a neon sign but you get my meaning...)

Isn't that amazing? The one who is Lord of all the hosts of angels, whose glory fills all heaven and earth, has entrusted to our unclean lips and fragile hands the mission of proclaiming the gospel.

**For Reference only:
Notes on Readings and initial responses...**

Old Testament: Isaiah 6:1-8

This is the great call of Isaiah, which very often provides a sense of encouragement and blessing to those who feel called to be servants of God in whatever capacity they serve.

However it is also a commissioning of Isaiah to deliver judgment to the people of God for their unfaithfulness, and so in that sense is also quite tough, although there are also many promises about God's faithfulness and the restoration of God's people.

New Testament: 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Paul reminds the people of Corinth of the importance of the resurrection of Christ. He declares himself to be part of the authority of the apostles even though he may be the least of them.

Discipleship is rooted in the resurrection, and he mentions the appearance of Christ six times. Paul invites us, through the Corinthians to take up the discipleship journey and to be faithful followers of the risen Christ.

Gospel reading: Luke 5:1-11

Luke gives us his account of the calling of the disciples.

Reading today's passages of Scripture, I was immediately struck by the theme of God's call and our response. All of our readings invite us to answer God and to walk the path of discovery and revelation

Isaiah: Go away / woe am I / I am sinful, of unclean lips
Isaiah shows us the awe, majesty, wonder, and vision of God.

Luke, telling of Simon-Peter and the other disciples and their responses – similarities to Isaiah

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**PRAYER AFTER COMMUNION**

Gracious God, we give you thanks for satisfying our hungry hearts with this holy meal, shared in the Spirit with Jesus, your Son, our Lord.

Strengthened and refreshed, we go from here to speak your love and to reveal your glory in the world. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

**BLESSING & DISMISSAL**

You have been in fellowship with your Lord.

Go forth now in the strength and assurance that the Lord goes with you.

May the God of love who calls you, guide you this day and always;  
His might uphold you, His love enfold you, His peace empower you;  
And may the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
Be with you now and remain in you always. AMEN.

not me . . .

you can't be speaking to me . . .

can you?

after all,  
i am a selfish person  
in a culture which  
worships the self;

i've never felt the brush of angel wings

no hot coals have singed my soul

and it is easier  
to pull in my fears,  
clean them up,  
and store them away  
for tomorrow  
    than to let them down  
    into the deep waters  
    of discipleship  
    and servanthood.

you can't be calling me . . .

can you?

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