

**Sermon for Mount Macedon and Riddells Creek
5th Sunday of Epiphany, 7th of February, 2010**

Isaiah 6:1-8

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Luke 5:1-11

Are we too casual about the ways in which we interact with God? Too familiar, perhaps, in our language? I have a Jewish friend with whom I chat using email, and whenever she refers to God, about whom we talk surprisingly often, she spells the name 'G' hyphen 'D', in a respectful Jewish manner. I spell 'God' the same way when writing to her, but the rest of time, God for me is 'G' 'O' 'D'; and I have no problem naming Him.

It's not just in our language that we treat God as an equal. In many ways it's also in the way in which we worship. I remember my Professor of Worship once talking about the 'Uniting Church' style. He said that we had had a choice about the way in which we set the worshipping scene. Either people could enter the church silently and reverently, communing quietly with God while waiting for worship to start, or we could enter informally, as though we were entering a friend's house, chatting with each other while waiting for the call to worship. The option that most Uniting churches have taken has been the second. We feel comfortable and at home in church, or at least that's the idea.

Comfortable and familiar is the way I tend to go. I'm always trying to convince the parents of young children that we don't mind babies crying and toddlers getting into everything during worship. When I was very young I would dress up to go to church; now my preferred church-going clothes are jeans, because that's what I wear everywhere else and I see worshipping God in church as another ordinary, taken-for-granted part of my life. In the same way I do a lot of my praying while driving my car or walking; I don't feel the need to stop and adopt a particular posture or find a particular place in order to talk with God.

In a sense, all this familiarity is encouraged by the incarnation. We've just spent a couple of months focussing on the miracle of God born as a human child. We sing 'Away in a manger' that describes the little Lord Jesus laying down his sweet head, or 'Once in royal David's city' which talks about Jesus as 'little, weak, and helpless'. Then we celebrate Jesus' baptism, reminding ourselves of the adult Jesus' solidarity with us; or read about his time in the wilderness, remembering that he, too, was tempted. We're encouraged to see Jesus, God made flesh, as our brother and friend. And since through the wonder of the incarnation, this brother and friend is also our God, we feel that we can approach God with an ease the many people of other faiths would find bizarre.

But there is another side, and it's one emphasized by the readings we've heard today. God is God, and we are not. We are shown or told about three encounters between God and humanity today: between the Lord and Isaiah; Peter and Jesus; and Paul and Jesus, and in all three cases the encounter with the divine provokes fear and an awareness of unworthiness.

Isaiah had a vision of the Lord. He saw a Being high and lofty, so beyond human stature that the mere hem of his robe filled the temple, a Being worshipped by seraphim who sang words that the church continues to use today: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.' And Isaiah's response to this is terror at his own humanity. He has seen God and he is afraid that this means death: '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!'

When Jesus appears to Paul, Paul has a similar reaction; he becomes acutely aware of his own unworthiness before God. Paul tells the Corinthians: 'Last of all, as to someone untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God'. The translation doesn't do justice to how unworthy Paul feels,

because by describing himself as ‘one untimely born’ he’s describing himself as an aborted foetus or a miscarried baby. Writing about this passage Bill Loader says, ‘one may well ask why such disrespect for a foetus’,¹ but the point is that Paul is describing how very lowly he is in contrast to the magnificence of God.

Then we have today’s gospel reading, and Jesus’ call of Peter. It’s a miracle story, the story of the miraculous catch of fish. By this point in the gospel Jesus has already healed Peter’s mother-in-law, and he’s well-known enough to have a crowd around him, which might be why Peter is willing to let down the nets again. Simon tells Jesus: ‘Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.’ Jesus is already someone to be addressed as ‘Master’ and someone whose commands are to be obeyed. But Simon Peter is apparently completely unprepared for what actually happens, for the overwhelming abundance of fish that begins to break the nets and fills two boats to sinking-point. He is aware of Jesus, the teacher and preacher and healer, in the same way that we are familiar with Jesus our friend and companion. But now in this miraculous catch Simon Peter encounters God, and his reaction is the same as Isaiah’s and Paul’s: a sense of his own sinfulness. He falls on his knees saying, ‘Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!’

It’s not just a sense of their own inadequacy that sends Isaiah, Paul and Peter to their knees. The majesty of God is scary! The glory of God has been revealed, and like everyone to whom that happens, Isaiah, Paul and Peter need reassurance. We’ve just seen that theme all the way through the Christmas story, as the first thing the angels say to Zechariah and Mary and the shepherds is ‘Do not be afraid’. Jesus tells Peter the same thing, ‘Do not be afraid’. But then he goes on to say something that I suspect might add to Peter’s terror – ‘from now on you will be catching people’.

These three stories of encounters with the absolute holiness of God, which all emphasise the feelings of unworthiness of the humans to whom they happen, end, somewhat paradoxically, with calls to mission and ministry. One of the seraphs touches Isaiah’s mouth with a live coal and tells him: ‘Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.’ Immediately Isaiah hears the voice of the Lord asking, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ And Isaiah answers: ‘Here am I; send me!’ The very reason that Paul is writing to the Corinthians, and is telling them of his encounter with Jesus, is that in that encounter he was called to be an apostle, and it was Paul who first proclaimed to the Corinthians the gospel of which he’s now reminding them. And Simon, of course, becomes Peter. Isaiah’s sin is blotted out; Simon Peter remains a sinful man, even denying Jesus three times. But that doesn’t matter. Jesus calls Simon, and Simon and his companions leave everything they have and follow him.

It’s good to remember that God is the Holy One, to acknowledge the transcendence and absolute Otherness of God. But not if we get stuck saying: ‘Woe is me’ or ‘Go away from me, Lord’. That’s not where these stories end. They end with the answering of God’s call. Recently I’ve been talking about baptism with a ten-year-old, someone who’s going to make baptismal vows for himself. This means that he will promise to proclaim, by word and example, the good news of God in Christ; to seek Christ in all people, and love his neighbour as himself; and to strive for justice and peace, respecting the dignity of every human being. In other words, like every Christian, he will answer God’s call to ministry. Part of the service of Baptism in the Church of India is for the candidate to place his own hand on his head and say, ‘Woe is me if I preach not the gospel.’ Our baptismal vows say something similar. They call us to follow in the footsteps of Isaiah and Paul and Simon Peter, answering ‘Here am I; send me!’ when God is looking for someone to send. They call us to not be afraid. We can answer the call in confidence, because, as Paul says: ‘by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace towards me has not been in vain.’ Amen.

¹ <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/CEpEpiphany5.htm>