

## ‘GO AWAY FROM ME, LORD’

Isaiah 6. 1-13

1 Corinthians 15. 1-11

Luke 5. 1-11

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

This past week, I especially enjoyed being in St Stephen’s Church, not only because I was able to see the team from Holy Well Glass remove the panels of our famous ‘Tree of Jesse’ window with great care and careful attention; I was also able to see people (like Paul Davies, a journalist from *Channel ITV News*) enter the church and discover its beauty for the first time. As he walked in with his colleague the camerawoman, Paul’s eyes immediately looked up; and then they were drawn towards the East window above the high altar. ‘Wow’, he said, ‘this is incredible’. In a word, you could say that Paul was overwhelmed by the *majesty* of this place. And that is exactly what George Frederick Bodley, the architect who designed St Stephen’s, intended: that this soaring architecture and these brilliant windows should overwhelm us with the *glory* of God.

Our Old Testament reading tells of the day when a young priest entered the Temple in Jerusalem to pray. As he did so, it was as if the windows of heaven were opened. ‘I saw the Lord’, wrote Isaiah, ‘...sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple’. (6. 1). The Septuagint, another version of the Bible which translated the Hebrew text into Greek, expressed the verse like this: ‘I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne lofty and raised up, and the house was filled *with his glory*.’ It is as if the hem of the royal, divine robe was understood to be the *glory* of the Lord. There Isaiah was, serving in the Temple, and suddenly it was filled with the glory of God.

In his vision, Isaiah heard a heavenly choir of seraphim (those fiery, winged creatures who serve at the throne of the Lord) singing, ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory’.

And we might think that the dear prophet, upon witnessing such a sight, would have been caught up in praise; transported in worship; and moved to adoration. Overawed by this vision, Isaiah speaks. He confesses. His words are full of dread. ‘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!’ Isaiah acknowledges the truly awe-full (that is, awe-inspiring) nature of the Lord’s holiness. In Isaiah, there is a recognition that coming into the un-mediated presence of the Lord is not something to seek, because it yields terror and death. After all, had God not said to Moses, ‘...You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live?’<sup>1</sup> The Lord is God; Isaiah is not, and nor are we. In any such encounter, there is danger.

In some churches today (and I am not criticising them at all), there is a tendency to transform the worship of God into the back-slapping conviviality of a social gathering. And whilst I am the first one to encourage everyone to find their joy in the Lord, I also realise (like Isaiah) that to be brought into the presence of God is to be brought to our knees. Here at St Stephen’s, in this building of great beauty, we encounter nothing less than the presence of God himself. As we encounter (in figurative terms) the gaze of the One who is so perfectly good, just and holy, we fall to our knees, just as Simon Peter did in our gospel reading. Ordered by our Lord to cast his nets out again into the sea, having caught nothing, and then realising that the nets were now so full of fish that they were beginning to break, Peter came face-to-face with the godliness of Jesus, and said to him, ‘Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man’.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Ex 33. 20. See also Jn 1.18.

Isaiah spoke of his ‘unclean lips’. Peter spoke of his ‘sin’. On this Fourth Sunday before Lent, it is appropriate that we consider our sinfulness, even if our appointed texts are also (and very much) about the worship of our Triune God, his call upon our lives, and the graceful bounty of life with, and in his Son.

We began this Mass with a confession of our sin. Any one of us who has even a shred of self-knowledge, knows that we sin. We recognise too easily our selfishness, our greed, our deceit and our lust. We all know the little slip-ups and indiscretions that we commit, and that we know we should not commit. You have your list, and I have mine.

But let us be clear: Isaiah’s ‘Woe is me!’ and Peter’s ‘Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!’ actually have little to do with our conventional definitions of sin. What if sin, the sin being confessed here, was not so much the occasional slip-up or what we have on our lists, but the *gaping chasm* between *who we are* and *who God is*? What if our sin (with a capital ‘S’) and our idea of our uncleanness was expanded, to include something more than what we do when others aren’t looking, to encompass the enormous gap between ourselves and our holy God?

Sigmund Freud, the Austrian founder of psychoanalysis, noted that we often project our parental experiences onto God; that is to say, many of us to think of God as the big parent in the sky who takes out his list of things that we should be doing and checks it over and over. But what if we came here on a Sunday morning and discovered (to our terror) that God isn’t like that at all? That God is the great Other, whom Peter saw that day when he looked into the eyes of Christ?

What if God, the one Peter saw projected back at him in the eyes of our Lord, is like a mirror, a mirror of truth and self-knowledge that we are made to gaze upon? There, in God’s gaze, we see reflected every moment of our lives; every secret thought; all

the good little things that we have done for bad little reasons; we see the way we really live. Who could endure to be made to look upon such a mirror?

God's holiness is the mirror through which our pretentious goodness is seen for what it really is. And all of us, who no doubt have come to church this morning to catch just a glimpse of God, have got more than we wanted; and we might be tempted to cry out and say to him (as Peter did), 'Go away from me!'

But do you know what? He never does. Across the gap between him and us, God reaches out in love. He is no mere cold mirror of judgement, but a living God of grace. He touches the lips of Isaiah and cleanses him, making him a prophet. When Isaiah says, 'I am lost', he is wrong: he isn't lost, he's found. And Jesus calls Peter to be a disciple, promising him that he will teach him to catch more than fish. Refusing to leave this sinful man, Christ forgives him even when Peter denies him three times at the cross. Why? Because once the living God gets hold of us, he doesn't let us go.

Today, in this beautiful and majestic place which is St Stephen's Church, as we prepare to partake of the Body and Blood of Christ, there is invitation rather than rejection. Our God will not forsake us. He won't get rid of us, and we won't get rid of him. Whatever the condition of our hearts this morning, God is waiting to meet us — face to face.

Amen.