

Trinity Sunday Year B

Trinity Sunday marks the end of the great cycle of Christian Celebration that began with Advent Sunday. It also invites us to ponder the awesome (and in some senses the impenetrable) mystery of God.

Isa 6: 1-8

As far as we can piece his story together, Isaiah was a civil servant in the service of the King of Judah. The year that King Uzziah died seems to have marked the beginning of a decline in the fortunes and security of the two kingdoms. As often in the Old Testament, such misfortune is attributed to faithlessness on the part of the people.

Here the prophet describes a 'vision' – an experience of great awe – while in the temple.

The curious description of the winged creatures (verse 2) includes reference to 'feet' – a common euphemism for genitalia. This suggests both that these angelic beings may have appeared to exhibit primary sexual differences, and that they behaved with appropriate discretion when appearing in public!

The temple was principally a place of sacrifice, in which the offered animals were burnt on the altar. Isaiah's reference to smoke (verse 4), therefore, is not very surprising. The words he heard ('Holy, Holy, Holy, ...') may have been the words of a temple choir singing a regular liturgy. Whether this is a plausible explanation or not, the sound and the words had a profound effect on Isaiah. He identified himself with his errant people (verse 5). The biblical experience of sin is strongly a community experience, not simply an individual experience. At times we read of prophetic writers who saw a need to correct this (see for example Ezekiel) by emphasising individual responsibility. Here Isaiah sees himself as caught up in the fallibilities of human society. 'We're all in this together'.

But he clearly also feels a need to be cleansed before he can respond in any way to God's presence. Reassured on that count, he now hears what the seraphic messenger has to say. It is a call to action; Isaiah responds eagerly.

Ps 29

This psalm picks up the overwhelming experience of awe and wonder (perhaps terror?) that Isaiah has reported. The picture is a rich and varied one, embracing on the one hand the exuberantly joyful skipping of young livestock (verse 6) and the terrifying phenomena of nature on the rampage (verses 5, 7 and 8). In the face of this, 'all cry Glory!'

Once again, in the face of life's most baffling and exhilarating episodes, the psalmist invites his hearers (and us) to place ultimate and contented trust in the God who lies behind all these manifestations of power.

Epistle Rom 8: 12-17

Paul here attempts to explain what it means to live in the Fellowship of the Spirit. He offers a contrast, between life in the Spirit and life in the flesh. His use of the term 'flesh' needs to be grasped with some care. It does not mean simply those 'base animal instincts' from which the Victorians recoiled (in public at least) with such horror. For Paul 'according to the flesh' is simply 'not according to the Spirit'. That is, the term 'the flesh' covers everything that is not animated and motivated by the Spirit of God. And if that is indeed the case, then we are children of God.

We do not owe 'the flesh' anything, says Paul. We are under no obligation to let it dictate what we do or how we do it.

Paul then points us to a particular consequence of this unity between us and the Spirit. Our aspirations, longings and prayers are articulated, on our behalf, by the Spirit. However much we feel baffled and numbed by circumstances, however fumbling our attempts to express ourselves to God, the Spirit will lift our thoughts and words and turn them into expressions of our love for God and our desire to be close to God.

Gospel John 3: 1-17

John's story of a midnight visit to Jesus by a closet disciple (who feared a public association with Jesus might be dangerous) provides an opportunity for Jesus to engage with a scholar. The Evangelist does not report the opening niceties ('Good evening, how are you, how can I help you?') or even give us room to speculate about them. Rather, such niceties as there are come from Nicodemus. But Jesus' response is direct and profound. If Nicodemus (and by implication, anyone else) wishes to respond to the presence of God, he (or of course she) must be prepared for a radical change in the way he understands himself. Nicodemus, for example, was a leading figure among the Pharisees, scrupulously careful about following and cherishing the Law. That was how he defined himself, how he measured his every action.

But Jesus told him that he would have to be born again. He would have to learn all over again how to be Nicodemus. He would have to set aside his personal reputation and his public image, and learn instead to place his trust in God's Spirit.

Poor Nicodemus found this really hard. He couldn't see that Jesus was using a metaphor; his mind was immediately filled with thoughts of the birthing room and he came to a complete standstill!

Moving on, Jesus talks about himself and his own mission. Perhaps this was really what Nicodemus was worrying about all along. In his preaching Jesus seemed to be undermining and challenging everything that the Pharisees held dear, perhaps even condemning them for what they were not. But here in this clandestine meeting Jesus offers Nicodemus the ultimate assurance. His purpose is to rescue, to save, even him – Nicodemus.

Second Service

Ezek 1: 4-10, 22-28a

This is the description of Ezekiel's vision – perhaps the most amazing and mind-boggling description in the whole Bible. What is he on? How about God (1)?

Ps 104: 1-9

This is (the beginning of) a creation poem. In HP this psalm is represented by a selection of verses, not offering this particular sequence.

Epistle Rev 4: 1-11

This reading from Revelation echoes in many ways the spirit of the vision in Ezekiel 1.

Gospel Mark 1: 1-13

Even here there is a vision! But this one is private.

Some general remarks about ecstatic biblical visions. Clearly Ezekiel has “seen visions of God”, as he reports in verse 1. Windstorm coming out of the north. The north was the traditional home of the Babylonian deities (Carley [1] p 14). Israel's God retains his power even though He chooses to live for a time in the home of those Babylonian deities.

Four wings. The Ark of the Covenant was guarded by two cherubim, each with two wings. Isa 6 describes an unspecified number of seraphim, each with six wings. In the Tigris-Euphrates region statuettes have been found of four-winged creatures. Likewise, statuettes having four faces have also been found there (Carley [1] p15.) Two of the wings were for flight, the others for modesty. (Does this suggest that the seraphim possessed sexual apparatus?)

There are signs of gender in the language used of these “living creatures”. In vv 6b and 11b “their bodies” is feminine, but throughout the rest of this description the pronouns are masculine.

There is considerable uncertainty about the number of “hands”.

The four faces (man, lion, ox, eagle) represent the pinnacles of strength and nobility in the animal and bird world. It is interesting that man is so grouped in this source. These four animals were later used as symbols for the four evangelists (respectively of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John).

The lightning and fire are reminiscent of the ceremony of sealing Abraham's covenant in Gen 15:17.

The vision in Revelation, like the rest of this book, deploys myriad images that clearly meant something to the original readers. What that something

might be is beyond our reach. There is, therefore, no point in speculating about the minutiae of the images, or their meaning. It is in the cumulative effect that the book makes its point. The over-riding impression is of mystery and transcendence being seen ("I saw" is a characteristic phrase in this book) and understood by the prophet, even if he can communicate his visions only imperfectly.

It is also full of references and allusions to the OT prophets, so that a reader familiar with those sources would, at least to some degree, feel he was on familiar ground.

Revelation is centred in Jesus and in particular his resurrection. (The lamb that was slain and yet lives) It celebrates God's victory, in Jesus, over sin and evil. But this revelation is not just *about* Jesus, it is *from* Jesus. Often, it is his voice that speaks.

1. Carley, Keith W: The Book of the Prophet Ezekiel; Cambridge Biblical Commentary on the New English Bible.
2. Johnson, L T: The writings of the New Testament (rev. 1999).

Some reflections. Think for a moment about some distinct aspect of contemporary culture – television advertisements (which some of us feel may be more entertaining than some of the programmes); soap operas; the Eurovision Song Contest, The World Cup ("it is now!", "the hand of God"); the delightful balloon that was, not long ago, the brand image of BBC1; the brand image of BBC2 with its delightful animated "2"s (especially the one where they do a handkerchief dance). A story woven through with references to any of these items would instantly feel familiar.

What are these visions about?

They attempt to bridge the gap between the familiar and the strange. They are descriptions of the extraordinary couched in terms of the ordinary.