

7th July 2009 Sermon: 'The Holiness of God'

Romans 8:12-17

Isaiah 6:1-8

What do we mean by 'holiness'? This heavily-religious word can be translated: the 'otherness' or 'purity' of God.

Many people without strong faith commitments often don't struggle to conceptualise the holiness of God. Depictions of God in art, movies and popular culture often portray a God who is up in the sky,
often shrouded in clouds,
and perhaps all that we can take in is a bright light and booming voice.

As common as these conceptions of a holy God are, they are unbiblical and unhelpful. They are predicated largely on a Deistic understanding of God; a god who creates the universe but (like a divine watchmaker who winds it up and leaves it to run) the deistic god leaves creation alone. God is completely 'other' from creation, and this supposedly safeguards God's holiness.

This vision of Isaiah seems to highlight for us the sense of distance the prophet feels between:

God (up here as it were), and
him (down here).

"Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips!"

In recognising the presence of God, Isaiah is aware of his comparative unworthiness and sinfulness.

Many of us will often struggle with a God who is holy (who is 'other') to the detriment of an adequate appreciation of the relationship that has been enabled with God.

God is holy.But that is not all God is.

We will come to the understanding the NT provides for us in a moment, but even here in this OT passage of Isaiah we see that God is not only holy and other.

God engages with Isaiah;

God connects with Isaiah,

God shows himself,

speaks to Isaiah

and asks Isaiah to represent him to others.

In fact, what we have here in this vision is a pattern for our very own worship.

Last week, in talking about the energy released at Pentecost, I made the explicit point that Pentecost is not a pattern for worship (rather it was a story about our identity as a church, a birth story).

Contrastingly, there are elements here in this vision that serve as a framework for our own pattern of worship today: {**look at Service Sheet**}

1. Praise [*Call to Worship + Hymn*]
2. Adoration
3. Confession of sinfulness [*First prayer*]
4. Forgiveness [*Words of Assurance*]
5. Call/Proclamation of the Word [*Readings + Sermon*]
6. Response [*Prayer of Thanksgiving + Offering + Prayers for Others (+ Communion)*]

Following the combined Pentecost evening service last week I asked one of my Roman Catholic clergy colleagues for a supply of something for our worship today that only he could provide!

[incense started]

Think about just how multi-sensory the worship experience is in Isaiah:

- Visual (*I saw the Lord sitting on a throne*)
- majestic (*high and lofty*)
- fantastic (*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.*)
- praiseworthy (*'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.'*)
- unstable (*The pivots on the thresholds shook*)
- flammable (*the house filled with smoke.*)

We don't always see such multi-sensory elements in our own worship.

The Reformers reacted against some of the more '*sensational*' aspects of worship, and so we have missed out on elements which have been part of worship longer than they have not been part of worship.

Not using incense in worship is a recent innovation!

Psalm 141: *I call upon you, O LORD; come quickly to me;*

give ear to my voice when I call to you.

Let my prayer be counted as incense before you,

Today, may the smell of this incense not offend us
but be a sensory trigger for us that God is always capable of surprising us and coming to us in new ways.

With God, things aren't always what we expect them to be...

Take the coal on the lips: this is not judgement or punishment (which we might be inclined to think!), but represents cleansing and purification. Much of the **fire imagery**

in the scriptures, can be misunderstood as punishment (perhaps referring to hell), but is actually removal of impurity – drawing on the metaphor of refining precious metal by fire.

The holiness of God is shared with us to make us holy – more on this in a moment...

This vision of God's holiness is (to use an overused term) truly *awesome*.

It invokes a response worthy of a holy God. We respond with worship: praise, adoration and confession.

But what about today's passage from Romans?

Paul talks about Christians addressing God as 'Abba, Father'.

This amazingly intimate expression that is one of the few words in the NT that goes deliberately untranslated from the Aramaic – the language that Jesus spoke. 'Abba' translates as 'Dad'.

At first, we might think that such familiarity clashes with the holiness of God. Are we really allowed to talk to God like this?

God may condescend to us,

 receive our inadequate worship

 or commission us for a task,

but how is it that we can authentically address God in this familiar manner?

On what basis do we presume to call God 'Abba, Father'?

It is Jesus Christ (fully human, fully divine) who makes the transcendent God imminent.

 He is the Word made flesh;

 God incarnate,

 Emmanuel: God with us.

Addressing God on such familiar terms is not even our initiative.

The inference in Paul's writing is that it is God who enables us to address him this way: *"When we cry, 'Abba!* Father!'" ¹⁶it is the Spirit bearing witness* with our spirit that we are children of God,"*

The Holy Spirit (who is the Spirit of Jesus) makes available to us that which belongs to Jesus; what is his becomes ours.

Because of the cross and the resurrection, the holiness of God is shared with us, making us holy – a holy priesthood. (1 Peter 2:5)

The words of the last hymn put it so well...

 Lord of infinity/stooping so tenderly/

 lifts our humanity/to the heights of his throne.

Paul describes that when we live in the flesh we are debtors,

but in Christ we are **recipients**;

we are heirs standing to receive an inheritance.

Because we live in Christ, we are no longer debtors.

Many today struggle with a crippling level of debt. According to the Reserve Bank:

- “By December 2008 the outstanding total debt of households had increased more than six times in dollar terms since 1990.
- As a percentage of households' disposable income, household debt peaked at over 160% early in 2008, nearing 3 times the December 1990 level.”¹

These are startling statistics about where we have got to with our level of consumption.

Today however, we are reminded that (however the economic stats read) we are not primarily consumers who are mired in debt.

Rather we live into a far greater reality, we are heirs; recipients of that which is Christ's. We are already inheriting a treasure that is not reduced by moth and rust.

Of course, it is not an economic transaction that's at the heart of sharing in what is Christ's.

As the title ‘Abba, Father’ suggests, the basis of our new relationship with God is...

love.

We have no rights to exert; no entitlement. We do not deserve God's love. Neither does God need to love us.

God does not need relationship with us; God does not need anything.

Rather the relationship he invites us into is the **overflow** of the love of God shared between the three persons of the **Trinity**.

This love is so pervasive, so real, that it flows not only from God to us, but (like the dance of connectedness between the persons of the Trinity) so the love of God connects us to **each other**.

We share in the reality of the life of the Trinity **together**.

This shared living is at the heart of our worship, the Word of God among us and the sacraments we faithfully celebrate together.

This profound truth of the life of Trinitarian love is expressed so simply in this poem from Margaret Butler:

We are called to dance,
to weave in and out.
To grow in relationship
To belong
And to heal and serve
In relationship
In the life of the Divine,
Who is Trinity,
The God who loves.

Repetition was a way of underlying words in the OT. ‘Holy, Holy, Holy’ conveys where the emphasis is placed. Although these words did not have the meaning of

1 Reserve Bank Website: <http://www.rbnz.govt.nz/keygraphs/fig5.html>

Trinity at the time, they remind us that, in Jesus, God is revealed as this amazing and mysterious 'divine and holy community'.

The Trinity is otherness and also intimacy.
The Trinity is holiness as well as familiarity.
The Trinity is power as well as mercy.
The Trinity overflows with love,
 pours out love
 floods us with love.

Thanks be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.