

An Encounter with God

The sermon given at the Parish Communion Service on 10 February 2019 by the Associate Vicar, the Revd. Wendy Wale, in Beverley Minster.

Isaiah 6: 1-8; Luke 5: 1-11

I love shopping for amusing Birthday cards and one of my favourites is of a lady answering the door to two people who ask her- "Have you found Jesus?" and when you look more closely at the card there are a pair of sandal wearing feet and a man with a beard peeping out from behind the curtains....

I think part of the appeal of the card is that in today's society and particularly for those of us who are of English sensibility....the notion of someone knocking at our door, or stopping us in the street and asking us directly about our faith can be somewhat awkward.

Are you saved? Have you been washed in the blood of the lamb? Do you know Jesus as your saviour and Lord? Have you repented of your sins?

Are all questions that most people, even those who have a faith, might find difficult to answer – especially if caught off guard by a stranger.

Both of our readings this morning are about encounters with God- they are two of my favourite passages in the Bible (I have a lot of favourites!) - because they illustrate the fact that encountering God, meeting Jesus, experiencing faith, is far more complex and mysterious than the answer to a direct question.

Isaiah has this incredible vision....and if we had more time this morning, I would give you all a piece of paper- and ask you to draw what you think Isaiah saw...just mentally try and do it now....

Isaiah saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. ² 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. ³ And one called to another and said:

*“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”*

⁴ The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.

Isaiah’s response is one of horror...which is not that surprising - I imagine the scene like something from a 3D virtual fantasy game where the player quickly realises there is no way they are going to defeat the deity on the throne....Isaiah responds, “I am a man of unclean lips, I am lost, woe is me...I have seen the King the Lord of hosts.”

Isaiah was already a person of faith - but in this encounter, he recognises afresh the overwhelming, indescribable power of God - and his own limitations, realised in the face of this new reality. In the vision, the Seraph touches his lips with a live coal, tells him his sin and guilt is dealt with...and Isaiah takes up the call to be the human representative for the word of God: “*Here I am...send me!*” Isaiah is prepared to leave everything- even the comfort of his own people- to follow the call of a God whose power is utterly overwhelming.

I wonder if you can already spot some of the parallels with the encounter that the first disciples have with Jesus. They were fisherman- ordinary, everyday folk...unlike Isaiah, they were probably not prone to having visions of God...although they would have known the Scriptures and the temple traditions through their Jewish identities and culture. I like to think that if they did have dreams or visions, they would have been of nets full of fish - opportunities to make a little more money, to support their families, to thrive in life.

Simon Peter, James and John had just pulled a long and unsuccessful night shift- physically and mentally demanding. They were exhausted. They are cleaning their nets, which we can assume was the last step before heading home to sleep. I imagine the last thing they wanted was to lend their boat to Jesus - the controversial preacher with crowds following him. We don’t know what he was teaching about (I can imagine Simon

Peter dozed through it!) but when he finally finishes and Simon can almost see his bed....Jesus tells him to take his boat back out and carry on fishing.....

Think back to those awkward conversations earlier...this is perhaps worse than one of those...."Master, we **have** worked all night long but we have caught nothing"...and you can imagine what they were thinking- *we are experienced fishermen, you're a carpenter who talks about God- who do you think you are to tell us about fishing?*

..."Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets."

You see there's something about an encounter with Jesus - we see it time and again. He appears in the most impossible of situations when people are at their most vulnerable and he invites them to trust him to bring change...the woman who had been bleeding all her life, the tax collector who was everyone's enemy, the social outcast leper, the boy with a small packed lunch, the man with a sick daughter, the hosts of the wedding that ran out of wine....a tired fisherman without any fish....

Simon Peter, exhausted, hungry, fed up...let's down his nets and catches more fish than he's ever seen in one place in his life....*they filled both boats with so many fish they began to sink!* Everything the fishermen could hope and dream of takes place...and they are, like Isaiah, horrified!

Simon Peter fell at Jesus' knees saying "Go away from me Lord for I am a sinful man."

James and John were with him and similarly overwhelmed and amazed - it probably felt as if they were having a tiredness-induced vision!

Like Isaiah, a glimpse of the extraordinary power of God is a stark reminder of their own frail humanity...and a willingness to leave everything to follow him.

What really strikes me about both of these encounters is the recognition of sinfulness doesn't come from guilt or accusations or sense of doing something wrong...but instead, a tangible encounter with the fact that we are not God - that God is a power greater than we can imagine, that God is interested in us and our situations and that God invites us to join in with his plans- being part of something that can seem impossible or huge- recognising our lack of qualification.

I'd love to hear all the different ways that people here have encountered God- I've heard a few stories and many of them involve a time of crisis...ill health, loss of a child, a profound sense of being out of control - but knowing God present and involved. Like Isaiah's they were memorable and life changing...

I have a friend who, as a young man, drove his car off a cliff (taking a bend too fast) and was saved by a branch growing out the side near the top- he encountered God when his passenger screamed at him, "Well someone clearly wants you alive, you'd better find out why!"

But we are all invited to encounter God each week when we come to worship - in the bread and the wine, the reading of his word or hearing the beautiful music. It's not necessarily dramatic but is the regular reminder in the midst of our ordinary everyday lives that we don't have to try and be God- we can let go of the temptation to try and fix everything. We can't fix everything - we can't make babies be born on time... or wish ourselves 20 years younger!

That there is an amazing power, beyond anything we can imagine, that simply invites us to be forgiven and healed...and then to trust and to follow.

Many people don't attend church...they are out fishing all night- working hard to survive, seeking a better life for themselves and their family. My prayer this morning is that they too will encounter Jesus in the places they find themselves. Both Isaiah and the disciples were sent from their encounter with God to tell others about the good news they had discovered, the stories they had been part of, the encounter that had changed their lives.

I'm really not going to suggest that you walk up to someone on the street this week and ask them if they've found Jesus....or been saved from their sins- BUT, I am going to suggest that as we open our eyes to see where God is at work in the world, we can be inspired to pray for those we meet to encounter him too.

We might want to start by chatting to someone in the queue for tea, by being friendly to someone in the supermarket, chatting to our near neighbours, praying for someone we know is unwell, sending a card to someone who might be lonely...and if you are feeling

that it's been a long time since you encountered God for yourself- why not ask someone to pray with you during communion, commit to attending the Lent Course or find out about the new home groups starting after Easter...or simply sit and allow God to find you in the stillness of His peace.