

Sermon for Evensong on Trinity Sunday, 11th June 2017

Isaiah 6:1-8, John 6:5-15 - Seraphim

I've always thought that the picture of the seraphim in heaven was a bit like one of those pictures of Leonardo da Vinci's 'ornithopter' - one of the earliest flying machines - or rather, the earliest not-flying machines. Six wings. Two covering his face: two his feet, and two doing what wings normally do, giving aerodynamic lift: 'with twain he did fly'. Perhaps Leonardo got the idea from the sixth chapter of Isaiah.

Do you know what a seraph is?

'Thus spake the seraph,
and forthwith
appeared a shining throng
of angels praising God'

A seraph is a super-angel, a six-winged angel, supposed to be the highest in heaven under God.

This is a truly splendid vision. I don't know what you feel about angels. Surprisingly sane people tell me that they believe in them. 'Do you have a guardian angel?' they ask.

Well, no, I say hastily. Wait a minute - is that rather too hasty? What is an angel? It may be a question what a particular type of angel is, or does, such as the seraphim; but what is an angel anyway, any type of angel? An angel is, in Greek, a messenger. This story, about the calling of the prophet Isaiah, indeed does involve an angel as a messenger, of sorts. He brings a message to Isaiah. God is calling him.

Isaiah is reluctant; he is not worthy, he says. 'Woe is me! for I am undone'. He has seen the Lord of hosts, God. The Jews believed that only a priest was allowed to see God. Only the priests went into the innermost part of the Temple, the holy of holies. Other people, if they saw God, would be consumed, burned up, because they could not co-exist with God.

Isaiah says he has 'unclean lips.' Dirty. Dirty both physically and metaphorically. But the seraph brings a red-hot coal from the fire, 'and he laid it upon my mouth': a live coal, a coal glowing red-hot. Surely Isaiah would have been horribly burned: but no, the effect is just to cleanse him morally:

'Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged'. Isaiah is cleaned up, fit to do the Lord's work. 'Whom shall I send?' asks the Lord: and Isaiah says, 'Here am I; send me.'

What to make of this today? We probably don't think of God as 'sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up.' But wait - it says, 'and his train filled the temple'. They were in the temple. Just as we are here in church. In a sense, this is where God lives. People can say, sometimes, that you don't have to go to church in order to encounter the divine at work, in order to meet God. To which the Churchman will answer, 'Indeed, you're right: but it certainly makes it easier, to go to the house of prayer.'

What was the seraph doing with his red-hot coal? Cauterising the wound, the septic sore caused by all the bad things Isaiah had been doing. That seems pretty drastic. Perhaps there's the same sort of idea that people had when they put witches in a ducking stool. If the poor woman somehow managed to avoid drowning, she was purged of her sins.

This is very old, very ancient stuff. Isaiah - first Isaiah, as the Book of Isaiah actually contains material from three prophets - first Isaiah was written about 740 BC. Eight centuries before Christ would be born. Nearly 3,000 years ago. Can we usefully talk about having 'unclean lips' today? Are we fit to do things for God? It doesn't really translate in any literal sense, but I think we can nevertheless understand the drift.

Where would we look, if we wanted to find a seraph, an angel? An angel with six wings, even: maybe a sort of drone, these days. If we look at our second reading, from St John's gospel, Jesus is casting the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, in that role after he had gone. Not so much as a way of calling people - although arguably the most effective disciple, St Paul, was overcome by a sort of seizure at the behest of the Holy Spirit, and it resulted in him being converted, and accepted by them.

Instead these are all aspects of the divine, of God. Today is Trinity Sunday, when we remember 'God in three persons, blessed trinity', Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Not three gods, but three aspects, three personae of one. God the Creator. God with us in human form, Jesus Christ. And then when Jesus ceased to be here as a human, in his place came the Holy Spirit, the Comforter.

And the Comforter - not a lovely ladies' scarf, by the way, but the Holy Spirit - that is the way we think of God's presence with us now. Not a seraphim, not an angel, but I would have thought that it does no harm for us to imagine the heavenly realm, and feel called as Isaiah was. 'Here I am; send me.' What a great message. Here we are. Send us!

Amen.

Hugh Bryant