

A sermon by Richard Bauckham for Sunday 30th May 2021

Holy, Holy, Holy – Isaiah 6:1-8

Here are some words that we say or sing every time we take part in a Communion service. I'm sure they will be very familiar to you all:

Holy, holy, holy Lord,
God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.

That's the modern language version. If you're more familiar with the Prayer Book version, here it is:

Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts,
heaven and earth are full of thy glory.

Those words have been used in Christian worship for a very long time, from very early in Christian history. But I think it's quite remarkable that they go back not just two thousand years, to the time of Jesus, but more than seven centuries even before that, to the time of Isaiah. Of course, the Psalms also go way back into the Old Testament period. But the "Holy, holy, holy" hymn is more special because Isaiah didn't just write it, he heard it in his vision, sung by those strange heavenly creatures the seraphim.

(By the way, the hymn that we sang at the beginning of this service – Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty – is not based directly on Isaiah's vision. It's based on the words in another vision, by the prophet John, in the book of Revelation in the New Testament. That's another story, but I want to stick with Isaiah's vision today.)

The words in our Communion liturgy are those Isaiah heard sung by the seraphim. They occur in the service right at the heart of it, just before we turn to remembering what Jesus said about the bread and the wine at the last supper. Very sadly, we have mostly not been able to take part in the service of communion during the pandemic. But I hope we have not forgotten that that really is the heart of Christian worship. We cannot do without it. And right near the centre of it is the song of the seraphim from Isaiah's vision. That's why those familiar words are introduced, as you will remember, like this:

Therefore with angels and archangels,
and with all the company of heaven,
we proclaim your great and glorious name,
forever praising you and saying,
Holy, holy, holy Lord....

When we sing those words, we are not just a small gathering of people who live in Newnham or Grantchester.

We are not even just part of the worldwide church of Christ. We are worshipping with the angels in heaven, who join our worship with theirs, and we keeping alight, as it were, the flame of worship that has been burning without interruption through all the centuries from the times of the patriarchs and prophets. When we use those words from Isaiah's vision right at the heart of our Christian worship we acknowledge that we worship the same God, the God that Isaiah saw in his extraordinary vision back in the eighth century before Christ.

Isaiah actually gives a very precise date for his vision, locating it firmly in real history: "in the year that king Uzziah died." That's around 740 BC. It was a memorable year. King Uzziah had reigned for 52 years. So just as today most people cannot remember a time before Queen Elizabeth II was queen, so in Isaiah's time most people will not have been able to remember a time before Uzziah was king of Judah. It was the end of an era, and it was a time of mounting political turmoil in the middle East that would involve Isaiah and his people. Isaiah could not have forgotten the date because it marked the great turning-point in his own life, the vision in which he received his prophetic mission from God.

An experience so out of the ordinary as this cannot be shared at all adequately with others. But Isaiah wanted to share at least the essence of his experience and he has tried to paint a picture of it in words. So it's well worth asking: what is he trying to tell us about God by describing his vision?

Isaiah is in the temple, the great temple that king Solomon had built in Jerusalem. He seems to be looking into the sanctuary building. There in the holy place was the altar on which the priests burned incense. And the innermost sanctuary, the holy of holies, is where God was present in darkness and invisible. This was the place where God was present with his people on earth but it was also a kind of meeting place of heaven and earth. It was God's earthly throne room corresponding to the heavenly throne room where God dwelt in visible splendour. In Isaiah's vision the earthly becomes the heavenly.

No one thought God was confined to the temple. Solomon himself, in his great prayer at the dedication of the temple said, "Heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain you. How much less this house that I have built." So Isaiah's vision begins in the temple but as soon as he sees God on his throne it breaks the bounds of the temple. The great throne looms way up into the sky. And notice that Isaiah doesn't actually describe God. None of the biblical visions of God do. They hint at who God is by describing what the visionaries see around God. Isaiah's God is uncontainable and indescribable.

What he does describe are the seraphim. Now you must put aside any images of angels that you may have in your mind.

These creatures are most like dragons, flying dragons. The word seraph means burning. They are the burning ones, the fiery ones – meaning perhaps that they breathe fire as legendary dragons do, but I think more likely that they are fiery all over, made of fire. They are awesome and dangerous, the terrifying guardians of the presence of God. I think we should imagine them as vast in size. But even these unearthly creatures, with their fiery eyes, dare not look at God. They cover their faces with their wings. When Isaiah lifts his eyes up towards the figure on the throne, what he actually sees are these great fiery presences warning him off.

But they are not just guardians, they are worshippers. Their voices make the temple building shake as though in an earthquake. The smoke that fills the temple may be incense or perhaps it is from their own fiery breath. They sing antiphonally, one to another. One sings, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts.” This is above all what the whole vision conveys to Isaiah: the holiness of God. Holiness in the Bible does not mean moral goodness. Of course, God is perfect goodness. But his holiness is something else. It is God’s absolute otherness. To get some sense of that, you need to think of the whole created universe and think: God is not any of that, God is not even all of that, nor is God something else like that. God is altogether other than that, so utterly different that we have no words to express it.

That’s why there was no image of God in the holy of holies. In every other temple in the ancient world, the inner sanctuary housed a statue of the god. The experience of going to such a temple culminated in seeing the god. There might be a ceremony, in which the priests sang hymns and burned incense, the curtains were drawn aside and through the clouds of incense the worshippers saw the god himself or herself. The temple in Jerusalem was different. The curtain was never drawn aside and everyone knew that if it were there was no god to be seen. Isaiah’s vision reveals to him why that was so. “I saw the Lord” he says, as any worshipper at any other temple might say when they got home. But he doesn’t really see the Lord. He sees that the Lord is uncontainable and indescribable. He sees that any statue would or image would be fundamentally misleading because it would compromise the absolute otherness of God. The vast and terrifying creatures of fire that he does see, more numinous than any cult statue, are not God, not even like God. They exist to show Isaiah that God is holy, unutterably other.

So one seraph sings “holy, holy, holy,” and another responds: “The whole earth is full of his glory.” That’s just as important. God’s holiness does not mean that he is remote in some inaccessible heaven. His glory fills the whole creation. The whole creation is his holy of holies.

He is not creation, absolutely not, but that means he can be present throughout it. And when we see, with even a secondhand copy, as it were, of Isaiah's vision, something of what God's holiness means, then we will begin to see God's glory in all his creation. Without that vision of holiness, we will confuse God with his creation. With it, we will glimpse his glory in creation.

I haven't time to talk about Isaiah's response to the vision and what happens to him. If you have a moment this week, go back to this text and think about that. There is a lot to be learned from it. But I want to make one general point: what this vision did for Isaiah was very far from being just an intellectual lesson in theology. He understood the holiness of God when it overwhelmed him. Don't expect to have a vision like Isaiah's. It's because most of us don't that he recorded his extraordinary experience for us. But God does give glimpses of his holiness to any who are open to receiving them.

Finally, I want to leave you with another short passage from much later in this very long book of Isaiah, but one that echoes the vision in chapter 6, and this is my favourite text about God from the Old Testament.

For thus says the high and lofty one
who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy:
I dwell in the high and holy place,
and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit,
to revive the spirit of the humble,
and to revive the heart of the contrite (57:15).

That's the essence of what Isaiah learned of God: the God who is absolute other, whose name is holy, is not therefore remote and unapproachable. Quite the opposite. He himself also is with us. He comes among us and alongside us. That's an Old Testament insight that comes very close to what we Christians know as the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, God with us, and the presence of the Spirit of Christ among us, God in us and among us. Isaiah didn't know about the Trinity but I think he would have understood it. I like to think that indeed he has come to see even more than he did at the time in the song of the seraphim to the God who is three times holy. Next time you take part in a communion service, remember that you say those words with angels and archangels, with seraphim and cherubim, and with the saints of all ages including Isaiah.