

The Call of Isaiah - Exodus 3.1-15

Every year on Trinity Sunday, our readings are about people being called by God. This morning, we heard the call of Isaiah, who was in the Temple one ordinary day when he saw the Lord sitting on a throne surrounded by seraphim. The Lord said, “Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?” And Isaiah said, “Here am I; send me.” This evening, we heard the call of Moses, also on an ordinary day, when he is out shepherding for his father-in-law beyond the wilderness in Midian. An angel of the Lord appears to him in a flame of fire out of a bush, and when Moses steps aside to see this miracle, he hears the voice of God, saying “Moses!” And he says, “Here I am.”

And here we are, and it’s twenty-eight weeks since Advent Sunday and twenty-four weeks till next Advent Sunday. At this midpoint of the year, we have lived through the story of the call of Mary and of John the Baptist, the Spirit calling Jesus, Jesus calling the disciples, and the disciples calling the world at Pentecost. Now we are being reminded of all the others whom God has called over the years. The only people we haven’t heard about are ourselves, because our story isn’t yet written.

But first to Moses. Moses had had a complicated life. Born into slavery in Egypt. Found in a basket by a princess, nursed by his sister but brought up at court as one of the royal family. He must have wondered who he really was. One day he tried to assert his Israelite identity by attacking an Egyptian whom he saw beating another Israelite. And found that being a prince didn’t prevent him being hounded out of Egypt in fear of his life. He arrived in Midian and married a shepherd’s daughter and became a shepherd himself. Then one day, a long time later says the Bible, when he had settled down, had a family, made a life, stopped thinking about Egypt – one day, he heard the voice of God.

I can’t help wondering: if God had used the words he later used to Isaiah – “Whom shall I send?” – would Moses have replied at all? Or would he have thought, No, thank you, I’ve had enough excitement for one life? You could forgive him for not wanting to go back to Egypt. And indeed when God tells him to go, Moses says, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” It’s a real question. Who is he, really?

But God is subtle. He doesn’t ask, “Whom shall I send?” He just calls Moses by name. And Moses says, “Here I am.” He may not be sure who he is – but he knows where he is. And when God says, “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground,” he obeys.

He knows where he is. And that is all God needs. He sets about healing Moses’ dislocated history and identity. “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” With those words, he gives Moses back his past. And Moses hides his face, afraid to look. Then the Lord says, “I have seen the misery of my people in Egypt ... I know their suffering ... So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egypt.” And with those words, he gives Moses his future.

Moses was not ready to be called. In a sense, Moses never will be ready. His whole life will be a journey, towards Israel's new beginning. He will travel a very long way, but he won't live to enter the Promised Land.

In that, he is like many of us. Here I am – here, now – is all most of us can say. We are creatures of place and time. Often not quite sure how we got here, and much less sure where we're going next. Even when we think we know, life has a way of springing something else on us. We're not quite who we were ten years ago, and we don't know who we'll be in ten years' time. And this despite the fact that many of us have a strong sense of who we would like to be, how we could be, if somehow life would let us. We long to be more complete, more fulfilled, more ourselves. Often, it never happens. We spend all our lives coming to be, and then we go without ever having quite arrived.

This instability, this imperfection, is one of the reasons why so many of us long for a perfect, unchanging God, someone to hold on to in this transitory life. But on Trinity Sunday, we ought to allow ourselves to wonder a bit about that. Is a God who is sometimes Father and sometimes Son, sometimes flesh and sometimes Spirit, so very stable and unchanging? Is the God who makes half a dozen different covenants with his people in the course of history, so unaffected by time and change? It might be better to think of God as moving with us through time, endlessly creative, full of potential, endlessly making good of whatever happens.

There is a story, that God and we are like a pair of carpet weavers. Father and son. A family business. They make a carpet together, one sitting at each end, weaving the same pattern. But because the son is only learning, sometimes he makes a mistake, and when that happens, the father alters his pattern so that the son's mistake becomes part of a new, right pattern. And so they go on.

Or to use another image, when we listen to beautiful music like we have heard tonight, it seems to me that our lives are very like a piece of music. They start off with a promise of all sorts of things, and gradually they develop, and change mood, and sometimes they come back on themselves and sometimes they don't. All the way through, they have many melodies, and sometimes they come to a cadence, a stop, and then go on again. Eventually they end – but however good the ending is, it never contains the whole piece. Too many things have happened on the way. And when we enjoy a piece of music, we don't just sit there waiting for the end to make it all right – we enjoy every moment of it. The music isn't solely in the ending; it's in everything that happens on the way.

Perhaps God is like that. Not just a grand perfect cadence waiting for us at the end of the world, but a music that makes harmony of all our lives as they go along. And just as the best piece of music isn't just the one with the best ending, but the best all through, so the best life is one which evolves with God the whole way through. In which God moves with us, sometimes lover and sometimes loved, sometimes the maker of new things, the sustainer of ongoing things, the mender of broken things.

Other people have seen God something like this. Some people talk about human history as having three phases: the age of God the father, the age of Christ, and the

age of the Spirit and the Church. Other people have wondered whether Godself actually changes over time in dialogue with us.

You don't have to go that far – you can say that God's relationship with us changes, without saying that Godself changes. But that's still something a bit different from the traditional view of God as having a nature completely stable and unchanging. It means that God is like all the music there could ever be. Through time, different parts of that music are called into being, to bring the world into a greater harmony. In other words, God does not only call us, God also calls Godself into new being, to fulfil God's ongoing creativeness and to answer the needs of the world.

The call to a new being can come any time. Before we're born (as the psalmist says), in childhood (like Samuel's), in middle age (like Moses'), or when we are already old (like Abraham's). We'll never be ready. But we will be here, now, this evening and tomorrow and the next day, and that is all God needs. The past is never wasted. The future is never ending. We may never arrive, but since God is already with us, we are already in the place that really matters. What we hope is to become part of God's music, which grows richer and richer and better and better as it moves on. Part of the slow evolution of eternal life. The joyful, delightful, endlessly creative life of God.

Amen

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