

Isaiah 6.1-8

Revelation 4.1-11

For the first fourteen years of my life, living in Bradford, I was brought up as a Christian Scientist, so throughout my childhood I thought God was quite stern and austere. Occasionally, as a Brownie, I was allowed to go to the local Methodist Church, and it was there I encountered an elderly Sunday School teacher who told us that he had heard God *speak* to him - quite clearly and audibly. This made quite an impact on me: I was eight or nine at the time. I asked him where this had happened: it was at the top of a very steep hill called Chellow Heights Lane (just one of Bradford's vast number of hills). This was actually on my way back from School. So I decided to see if God would speak to me, too. I still remember walking to the top of Heights Lane, just before it dipped down to Daisy Lane; I remember staying on the left side of the road, next to a wood, and I started listening very hard indeed. I asked God to say something to me. Silence. I decided I was on the wrong side of the road. So I crossed over, and again I asked God to speak. And again, silence. I think I was both disappointed and relieved!

In the Bible, God does sometimes meet his servants on high hills and mountains – there was Abraham on Mount Moriah, Moses on Mount Sinai, and later, Elijah, on the same mountain, also known as Horeb; and of course there was Jesus, too, on the Mount of Beatitudes, on the Mount of Transfiguration, and on the Mount of Ascension. So seeking God at the top of a Chellow Heights Lane was perhaps not a bad place to start. But what I know now is that we can't control God, and we can't assume he will speak out loud to us when and how we want. Furthermore, when God 'speaks', very few people today seem to hear a voice 'outside' them: it is more often than not an unspoken voice 'deep within'.

However, our reading from Isaiah is a reminder that the prophets, at least, heard God in an outward sense. The prophet is in the Holy of Holies in the inner sanctuary of the Jerusalem Temple, and he actually *sees* the Lord God high and lifted up, seated on the throne above the Ark, and the seraphim whose wings covered the Ark come to life and sing to God: 'Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God of Hosts. The whole earth is full of his glory.' Isaiah can only express a profound sense of unworthiness: initially he resists God's call. He is reassured and purified, and is then commissioned by God himself: he is to speak to his people about God's judgement, and not surprisingly they in turn will resist his message.

This account of Isaiah's overwhelming experience of God makes salutary reading. But God does speak in less dramatic ways, so that we hear him as that unspoken voice 'deep within'. This is really a challenge, because it is easy to tune out God's voice when it happens this way. This certainly echoes my experience over the last couple of years, and contrasts with my rather futile attempt to 'hear' God as a child. I have sensed, repeatedly, often here in this church, that 'inner voice', persistently saying that I ought to be ordained to public ministry as a Permanent Deacon. Precisely because this voice was so quiet, and only I could hear it, I have tried hard to resist it. I have argued, many times, 'I'm too old!' (I retire in late 2019); I have also protested 'I'm not physically fit enough!' (I suffer intermittently from arthritis); another objection has been 'I'm a Licensed Lay Minister already: I'm busy enough as it is!'; the final objection, when it became clear that this voice was asking me to serve here at St Barnabas, where I have worshipped for some 23 years, was 'I'm a woman and even as a Deacon this will cause division!' But that voice was persistent. Finally I approached the Bishop of Oxford, and then spoke and prayed with Father Jonathan; this was a year ago, and since then I have been through a distinctive process of training and formation. So I have capitulated: in five weeks I shall be ordained to the office of permanent deacon in Christ Church Cathedral.

God speaks to each of us in different ways. There are some here, I know, who feel called to the priesthood, and others who may also be called to the Diaconate; yet others might be considering whether God is calling them to the Licensed Lay Ministry. All these need testing, followed by further training and service. But there are countless other ways in which God is calling us to active service, here and now, in this church. For some this is to develop the children's work and to build up the family life in our church; for others this is to a ministry of welcome, for example as a sides-person at the back of the church. For yet others it is to be on the PCC, or to take part in reading the lessons and the intercessions, or to serve in the sanctuary, or to participate in the music of our church, or to become involved at St Thomas's. For others it is a call to many acts of practical service: God might call us to serve on the cleaning rota, or the coffee roster, or to look after our church garden, or to help with the social life of the church after the services. God calls who he wills and where he wills.

The last sermon I preached here on a Trinity Sunday was in 2009. Fr. Jonathan, Anne, Christopher and Edward had arrived the year before and we had just pledged ourselves to be 'the Church within the Parish', and to try to reach the 'unchurched' in Jericho. My sermon then was about how we might communicate verbally and practically the threefold faith we had been baptised into – the faith of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Life has certainly moved on since 2009, and on this Trinity Sunday some nine years later, as we move towards an interregnum, it is

perhaps maintaining our integrity as a *Church* which is at present our greatest preoccupation, whilst of course never losing sight of the *Parish* of Jericho to which the church belongs.

Recently as a PCC we had to consider how to make our special request to the Bishop of Oxford for a new priest. Right now we are in the process of creating our parish profile which will be an important part of attracting the right priest in the future. One of the challenges we all face, both PCC and congregation alike, is recognising that we are incredibly diverse – not only in our gifts, our skills, and our very different callings, but also in our different beliefs about ministry, both ordained and lay, and in our different beliefs about how the ministry of men and women is made effective here. Father Jonathan has impressed upon us again and again that we can only progress as a church if we seek to express our diversity within unity. ‘Unity and Flourishing’ has been our watchword: this is about maintaining unity and respecting different members have different theological views, so that we can live together with integrity within the same church. What makes St. Barnabas very different from other churches in Oxford is not only its sheer diversity but also its desire to express that diversity within our various callings without dividing the church.

But how is this relevant for Trinity Sunday? Because this is the day when we especially recognise that the God we worship is both ‘Unity and Diversity’. On Trinity Sunday we think of God as One in Three, and Three in One - the unity of the Godhead with the threefold expression of God as our Creator, Jesus Christ as the Incarnate Word, and the Holy Spirit as God’s sustaining Presence within the world. God as Trinity is therefore very much about ‘Unity and Flourishing’. So as we anticipate the challenge of the future, and as we each seek to listen to God’s call, and as we each reaffirm each others’ service, we inevitably have to recognize our differences whilst absolutely affirming our need for unity: our unique expression of ‘Unity in Diversity’ is a faint but vital reflection of the Unity and Diversity of God himself.

Our readings from both Isaiah and Revelation are helpful as we think further on these things.

In Isaiah it is the seraphim, in the Holy of Holies of the actual Jerusalem Temple, who sing the threefold praise to God: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory’. In Jewish worship today, this threefold call to praise is proclaimed daily by the congregation during the *Kedusha*, a prayer offered when 18 Benedictions are sung, standing, during a part of the synagogue service called the *Amidah*. The Jewish emphasis is clearly on the majestic unity of God.

In the book of Revelation, the setting is now the heavenly Temple, and the same threefold call of praise is sung by ‘four living creatures’, who seem to be angelic beings, taken from the book

of Ezekiel. Here, the call 'Holy, holy, holy' is about the way the early Christians were beginning to think of God as a Trinity - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, so the Christian emphasis is more on the extraordinary diversity of the Three in One. This hymn of praise is longer than in Isaiah and it has a repeatedly three-fold ring to it: **'Holy, holy, holy, The Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come... You are worthy our Lord and God to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed, and were created.'**

One of the best known hymns on the Holy Trinity is by a Yorkshire vicar, Reginald Heber. It shows so clearly this uniquely Christian emphasis on God in Three Persons, but on God still to be praised as One.

Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty!
Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee;
Holy, holy, holy, merciful and mighty!
God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!

Holy, holy, holy! though the darkness hide Thee,
Though the eye of sinful man Thy glory may not see;
Only Thou art holy; there is none beside Thee,
Perfect in power, in love, and purity.

In our service we shall move shortly from the Ministry of the Word into the Ministry of the Sacrament, and we will hear the choir sing the *Sanctus*, which is the same threefold address to God as thrice holy, and often sung in Latin. If we were in the Eastern Orthodox Church we would already have heard this threefold praise, there called the *Trisagion*, in a slightly different form: 'Holy God, Holy Strong, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us'. So this is part of the eucharistic prayer in the churches in both the East and West: the universal church is bound together in its worship of the holy character of God, the One in Three, and Three in One. Here at St Barnabas our aspirations for Unity in our Diversity are a microcosm of the worship of the church throughout the world.

But there is still more to this. In the Old Testament, in the book of Leviticus, God who is Thrice Holy challenges his people to imitate his holy character too. 'You shall be holy, as I am holy.' This is repeated in the New Testament, in 1 Peter: 'As he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."

So as a congregation, particularly in the coming months, it is not only about discerning our various callings, and through this discernment *modelling* the character of the Trinity in order to achieve unity within our diversity. We have to raise our sights even higher, to reflect, practically, the

holiness of God the Trinity *in our lives*. How do we *each* reflect God's holiness, in our diverse callings, and so to build up the unity of the church? There is much to reflect on here.

I end with a poem by Malcolm Guite, called, very simply, 'Trinity Sunday', because I think it offers a partial answer:

In the Beginning, not in time or space,
But in the quick before both space and time,
In Life, in Love, in co-inherent Grace,
In three in one and one in three, in rhyme,
In music, in the whole creation story,
In His own image, His imagination,
The Triune Poet makes us for His glory,
And makes us each the other's inspiration.
He calls us out of darkness, chaos, chance,
To improvise a music of our own,
To sing the chord that calls us to the dance,
Three notes resounding from a single tone,
To sing the End in whom we all begin;
Our God beyond, beside us and within.

Amen.