



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C

Holy Terrors

Readings: Isaiah 6:1-8, Ps 137, 1 Corinthians 15:1-11, Luke 5:1-11

Today's readings from Holy Scripture take us to the place of three of the great Theophanies, that is to say, appearances of and human encounter with God. Isaiah in the Temple, Peter on the lakeside and Paul on the Damascus Road. They could not be more different and could not be to more different men but the common factors mark them out for common consideration.

The account of the prophet Isaiah is given a specific date – 754 BC – the year in which King Uzziah died. Uzziah had reigned over Israel for a period of 52 years, ascending the throne as a teenager of 16 years and dying alone in his palace room, a victim of leprosy after a reign of military success against the old enemy, the Philistines (a war now some three thousand years old), economic prosperity and great building projects.

The account of Uzziah's contraction of leprosy is given in Second Book of the Chronicles Ch 26. It occurs when the King takes it upon himself to usurp the function of the priests and go into the Temple and burn the incense himself, despite the warnings of the brave priests who, risking the might of the state and the wrath of the king, warn him not to conflate religious authority with the power of the State. So it is with this

knowledge and its fearful outcome that we encounter Isaiah's theophany and its frightening context.

The Lord reveals Himself in His glorious majesty – a certainty of death to any who behold Him. The full panoply of the divine is shown in that moment to the prophet and he is rightly terrified. We are told, in addition, that the very foundations of the Temple shake and shudder and the building is filled with smoke, the ascending clouds from the Altar of Incense.

It is this same altar at which old Zechariah will encounter the angel and the promise of a son, John the Baptist. It is this altar which has been the downfall of King Uzziah. It is this smoke ascending which, in the words of the old hymn, 'incense owns a deity nigh'. It is this same incense which, gift borne by the Magi, mark out the High Priesthood of Christ. It is this same incense that represents, according to the Book of The Apocalypse, the prayers of the saints wreathing our altar here and ascending with our prayers in the Mass to the altar of God in Heaven. It is a reminder of the fragrance of Christ and of our martyr forebears who were prepared to die rather than offer a pinch of incense to the pagan gods, thereby denying them recognition as divinities in the face of the One True God. Remove this sign from the celebration of the Mass and you remove significance and the living memorial of the companionship of the saints, the divine encounter and the priesthood of the Messiah. Isaiah is rightly and understandably terrified. And here we see another important thing not to forget. The modern preacher tends to bang on ceaselessly about the love of God and this is not, in itself, wrong. It is simply imbalanced if we forget the scriptural reminder that, 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.' Proverbs 9 v 10

Until we have come face to face with almightiness of God, beheld His glory, realised the immensity and terrible holiness of His being, we cannot begin to understand the immensity of His love for us, His amazing condescension to us in Christ Jesus, His Son, or the magnificence of His mercy. The fear of the Lord is indeed the beginning of wisdom – but it is not the end of wisdom for , as St John reminds us elsewhere, in the end ‘perfect love casts out fear’ – but they are integral parts of the same process of discipleship.

Isaiah is confronted by the full panoply of Heaven in all its awesome majesty. Paul is swept off his feet by the blinding light on the Damascus Road and the voice of Jesus interrogating His erstwhile persecutor. Peter comes face to face on the waters of the deep with He who created all things from the waters of chaos before time was.

In the terror of the Temple, Isaiah confesses that he is a sinner and comes from a sinful people. One of the Seraphim, the closest to God , whose very name means , ‘The Burning Ones’, ablaze with the purifying love of God, takes an ember from the fire and purges the prophet’s lips. Peter falls to His knees confessing his sins and is raised up by His Lord. Paul, blind and helpless, is restored, confessing his sin in the waters of baptism.

In the wake of these terrifying encounters, these men receive their call. The beginning of wisdom, of knowing the truth about ourselves and God, is truly in the fear of the Lord and our confession and repentance.

Even in our common humanity we have intimations of this powerful theophany. In the Vita Nova Dante comes very near to this experience in purely human terms when he first falls in love with Beatrice, the very mortal ikon of unspeakable goodness.

‘At that moment the vital spirit, which dwells in the innermost chamber of

my heart, began to tremble so violently that throughout my being I heard these words, 'Behold a god more powerful than I who, coming upon me, will rule over my whole being. Woe is me for everything that stands in the way of this love.'

Fear trembling into love. Forgiveness and purification sought that our calling might be fulfilled. The pattern is the same. God understands His creatures and He loves us still.