

SERMON FOR EVENSONG - TRINITY SUNDAY

'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.'

The threefold Sanctus has become a very important part of Christian worship - whether we be Orthodox or Roman Catholic or Protestant. 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.'

I was about 13 when I show a real love of music, and I was given my first record player. It was a little thing and the reproduction was not that good. But I could now save up and buy records. I gave the family that my Christmas and birthday presents were all to be Record Tokens and when I had enough money, I bought the Bach B Minor Mass. At the end of this sermon I am going to play an extract - the Sanctus. It was the most amazing moment, when I heard this for the first time. If I had to whittle down my music to one record on the desert island, it is this one piece that I should want.

And all this arises from the vision of the prophet Isaiah in about 736 BC. The year that Uzziah died. It is unusual to get such a precise date for Old Testament events - but, as I hope to explain, it was a critical point in the story of Israel. In the first place, it marks the end of a long and prosperous reign, associated with military successes, impressive building operations, and agricultural advances, for the Chronicle record that Uzziah loved the soil. The year of Uzziah's death also marked the beginning of the Assyrian threat, which hung over Israel and Judah for the rest of the century.

At the end of the reign, a change took place in the relation between Israel and Jahweh. And Isaiah was chosen to be the instrument to proclaim God's judgement on the king and nation. The year in which all this occurred was the year of Uzziah's death. It was in this year that Israel as a people was given up to hardness of heart, and as a kingdom and country to devastation and annihilation by the imperial power of the world. It is noteworthy that the year of Uzziah's death should be the year in which Romulus was born; and that it was only a short

time after the death of Uzziah that Rome itself was founded! One commentator says: The national glory of Israel died out with king Uzziah, and has never revived to this day.

For Isaiah in the temple before the altar of incense, the world had become decadent. Uzziah's reigned for 52 years but he began to disobey the Lord his God towards the end, Uzziah became a leper; for it was in the Temple, before that same altar of incense, that "leprosy broke out on his forehead" as we read in [2 Chron. 26:16–21](#). The holiness that made Uzziah a leper can kill and maim; Isaiah discovered it could also cleanse and forgive ([6:7](#)). The Assyrian Tiglath-Pileser was the stick with which the Lord of hosts was going to punish them. It was one of the Woes that Isaiah proclaimed later on.

Was Isaiah's vision sparked off as he prayed to God for deliverance from this approaching storm? All prophets had to have been given a vision of the Court of Heaven, so that they could proclaim the word of God, from the High Council, as it were. The vision of Isaiah at the start of his ministry is not so much a description of the council of the Almighty but of the Glory and holiness of God. And this seems to be a waking vision, a bit like John on Patmos, who was lifted into the spirit - something like a higher level of consciousness.

Three things struck Isaiah about God: He was **seated on a throne**, He was **high and exalted**, and **the train of His robe filled the temple**. In the most holy place of the temple in Jerusalem, God's glory was held to be revealed between the cherubim on the atonement cover over the ark of the covenant. This is a small space, and perhaps some Israelites may have thought that God was fairly small. But Solomon, when he prayed that marvellous prayer of dedication of the new temple was right when he said that no temple could contain God and that in fact even the heavens could not contain Him ([1 Kings 8:27](#)). And Isaiah's vision was not of a small, a confined God, but a God who, even when seated on the Judgement Throne, filled the whole of the heavenly temple. Almost 150 years later Ezekiel had a similar experience.

The Lord's long robe speaks of His royalty and majesty.

It is only in this vision that we hear of Seraphs, the only time in the whole of Scripture - yet Cherubim and seraphim have become part of the language of heaven. The word seraph seems to have an intimate association with burning, and they were the fiery ones. Perhaps their appearance was like our Lord's on the mount of transfiguration - they shone - they burnt. And one of them took the burning coal to Isaiah to cleanse and purify his speech. They had **six wings**. Commentators say that covering **their faces** with **two wings** indicates their humility before God. Their covering **their feet** with **two** other wings may denote service to God, and their **flying** may speak of their ongoing activity in proclaiming God's holiness and glory. in **calling to one another** the seraphs, whose number is not given, were proclaiming that **the LORD Almighty** is **holy**.

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The hymn, for all its brevity, thunders out the nature, name and power of God in its first line - Lord of Hosts implies that he is *Almighty* ruler of all the armies, and resources, which he commands in heaven and earth. The second line the scope and character of his dominion. *Glory* is the shining-out of what he is, and therefore of his holiness; *the whole earth*, not merely Israel, was made by him and for this.

The threefold repetition of the word **holy** suggests supreme or complete holiness. Although we sing with the seraphs the hymn Holy holy holy especially on trinity Sunday, there is no suggestion of the Trinity of the Great God in Isaiah.

Repeating a word three times for emphasis is common in the Old Testament. In Ezekiel [21:27](#) ^{we read:} "this is what the Sovereign LORD says: Take off the turban, remove the crown. It will not be as it was: The lowly will be exalted and the exalted will be brought low. A ruin! A ruin! I will make it a ruin! It will not be restored until he comes to whom it rightfully belongs; to him I will give it."

The seraphs also proclaimed that **His glory** fills the **earth** much as His robe filled the temple. In the dedication of Solomon's temple, the presence of the Lord filled the whole place as the holy cloud, the shekinah, the presence of God, filled the whole place.

All this is in stark contrast with the sinfulness and rebellion of the people of Judah. God had called them to be a Holy people - but they simply failed in this, and needed the prophets exhortation to call them back to God.

But what exactly are we saying about Almighty God when we call him holy? The Hebrew Word has Canaanite roots and contains the idea of the personal awe and wonder and fear in which the Holy one is to be held. Take of your shoes, the ground where you are standing is holy - said not only to Moses at the burning bush - note Burning again - but to Joshua when he meets the commander of the Lords armies before the battle of Jericho. God's holiness expresses his divine perfection - and it sets Him apart from the mortal - the created order. That is why we read of God talking to the prophets using the words; mortal man - God stresses the difference between us, the created order, and God- the creator.

The idea of God's holiness is bound up with moral and ethical wholeness or perfection; freedom from moral evil. This all overlaps the idea of Righteousness and Justice of God. All of that is somehow brought together in the Holiness of God.

The other use of the term is to be set apart - sanctified FOR God. Our order of moral purity and righteousness is of a totally different order of magnitude from God's Holiness, but nevertheless we are called upon to try - with the help of god's sanctifying Spirit. To be both IN the world, but not OF it. Set apart for God.

God sets Isaiah apart - with the touch of a burning coal from the altar. The touch is a touch of cleansing, of forgiveness and the beginning of Isaiah's personal sanctification - making holy - setting apart, to be god's messenger.

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I; send me!’

Isaiah volunteered to be that servant. He did not discuss his call with the Lord, as did Moses ([Ex. 3:11–4:15](#)) and Jeremiah ([Jer. 1:4ff](#)), but accepted the appointment and made himself available to his Master. Just as James and John simply walked away from their business, their father, their boats and nets, and obeyed the call. Here I am, send me.

Never underestimate what God can do with one willing worker. There is an even greater need for laborers today, and we have tremendous opportunities for sharing the Gospel with a lost world. Are we God’s willing volunteers? In our NT reading Jesus the Son of God, promises the Spirit of God to lead us into truth, and to glorify God in us, while Jesus himself says that he will return to the father. That is all I will say about the trinity, because it is mystery. But I can say about the transcendent majesty of God - because I heard it in the voice of Johan Sebastian Bach.

“Go and tell” is still God’s command to His people (v. 9; see [Matt. 28:7](#); [Mark 5:19](#)).

He is waiting for us to reply, “Here am I; send me.”