

**Trinity Sunday 2018 (Year B)**  
**Isaiah 6, 1-8**  
**John 3, 1-17**

Isaiah and John present us with very different images of God.

In Isaiah we have the vast temple, with God sitting on a throne and his robe filling the temple. The threshold of the temple trembles and shakes. The image of God here is a being that fills the universe with awesome creative energy.

Our gospel reading offers a totally different image and atmosphere. Nicodemus meets Jesus. He is a seeker after truth, a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin. He had spent a great deal of time in and around the great new Temple - he was at or near the centre of the twin powers of both religion and politics. Yet he has recognised God in this itinerant preacher and healer. "No one could do the works you do unless he was from God", he says. Nicodemus seeks God under cover of darkness. *His* enquiry is put to Jesus in secret. So, the second image of God is a person-to-person meeting with a teacher, a quiet conversation going deeper into the meaning of life.

But Jesus the teacher points beyond himself to a third image of God: the spirit. You must, Jesus tells him, be born of water *and the spirit*.

John's whole gospel will eventually develop this theme of the Indwelling spirit. Jesus will tell his disciples that he is going away in body, in order that the spirit can come...and it is the spirit that will lead them/us into all truth. So, the third image of God is a life-giving energy to be seen and felt and responded to.

Each way of seeing God adds something to our understanding. Let us look at each in turn.

**First**, Isaiah's vision reminds us that the Presence or Power in the universe that we call God is Other... this being belongs to a different realm. Isaiah's vision reminds us that, sometimes, the overwhelming feeling we get in huge spaces - a cathedral, or a forest of tall trees, or a vast landscape can be *more* than a good feeling. It can communicate a deep truth about our relationship to the universe: it can keep alive a rumour of the vast 'otherness' of God, and we can discover a profound sense of 'knowing our place in the family of things'... we may see our lives from a different larger perspective.

Isaiah was shaken to the core by his experience. It changed his life. He was sure that he had witnessed something that people were not supposed to see: God himself, in all his heavenly power and might. '*Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord Almighty*' sing the seraphim to each other: '*heaven **and earth** are full of his glory.*' Isaiah had seen the power of the living God.

But here's the interesting thing. The truth of this episode is not only about the **power** and **otherness** of God. It's also about the limits of God's power.

For all the power that was expressed in the vision (and the singing and the trembling threshold), the central and most moving part of the story is not a power that makes things happen but a voice that asks a question -

“Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?”

It’s almost plaintive, pleading.

Where’s the power now?

This vast God needs ordinary people - this God needs a bridge between the two realms of heaven and earth, a bridge that will make a difference. This God needs people to say, as Isaiah did: “Here am I. Send me”. God needs someone to channel God’s word and peace and justice into the chaos of the world - to bring love and kindness where there is competitiveness and fear.

That is what the journey of faith – yours and mine - is all about. “Here I am. Send me”.

**Second**, let’s look at the image of God for Nicodemus.

- no noise here - but quiet - and an urgent thirst to get to know God through this man Jesus. And Jesus offers Nicodemus a puzzling challenge. You have to be born again.

Being born again - the question you and I may have been asked many times: are you born again? It usually means: have you had an experience like Isaiah: of being challenged and changed in an instant. Some of us may have, and that is wonderful.

But for many the challenge and the change takes place like Nicodemus: in secret and little by little.

It is interesting how often it is only in looking back can we recognise the moment when things changed. Sometimes, it might have happened even without our knowing.

The child psychiatrist Michael Rutter once carried out a large research project into the long-term effects in women of having being brought up in care-homes.

There was known to be a huge difference in outcomes. Some did well in later life and others did not.

Why? One factor that emerged was surprising. Very often there had been a teenage pregnancy. This proved to be a turning point for the young women. Would she marry the man who got her pregnant?

The surprise was that if she *did* – she had a poorer outcome.

So, what determined her choice? Rutter looked back into their past.

He found another surprise: she tended not to fall into the trap of marrying if *at some moment in her earlier life* she had some small experience of success or achievement or love: perhaps a swimming certificate, or a brownie badge, or a commendation for good work. But only in retrospect could this be seen.

Some small event had changed the whole trajectory of a life.

Being born again – from above - can be similar: even small events can change the direction of paths we choose in ways that end up having huge effects.

You may recall the Robert Frost poem:

**The Road Not Taken**

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveller, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;*

*Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,*

*And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.*

*I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less travelled by,  
And that has made all the difference.*

Things that seem small, and choices that seem little can have huge effects.

Christians believe that, in a similar way, the creative power of loving kindness at the heart of the universe that we call God, can work by affecting the smallest moments of love, or recognition, or kindness, and that these may then affect later life in surprising ways, having large effects later.

Of course, we'd love to know *now* what God is doing for us. We'd like to hear a clear voice. We'd like the Isaiah experience of undeniable vision. But we may be more like Nicodemus - wanting to know more, asking questions and not really understanding the answer.

This too is faith.

And it brings us to the **third image of God**. Jesus speaks to Nicodemus and says we need to be born of water **and** the spirit. He says we need to dwell in two realms at the same time: the physical world of here and now that we see and enjoy around us, and the other realm

where we see things in a new light, which gives us energy to rise up from the death and destruction that our selfish egos and pursuit of power constantly get us locked into.

‘How?’ says Nicodemus. But Jesus is enigmatic

‘You want to know about the spirit, Nicodemus? Sorry - it won't be tied down’.

‘You want to know where it comes from?

Look at the wind moving across the landscape. We see its effects, but we can't know **from where** it comes’.

*From where? “pothen” in Greek. This is a word that echoes through John’s gospel: The Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus talks of living water. She asks: you have no bucket and the well is deep: **from where** will you get this living water (pothen?). Pontius Pilate questioning Jesus at his trial: From where are you? “Pothen?” And here: The wind/ spirit.....you don’t know from where it comes (Pothen)*

So this third image of a God is of a power that is altogether unpredictable....like a sudden wind blowing up in the desert. You don't know where it's come from.

...but then....and just as important... **you don’t know where it goes either.**

And that isn’t that also true to our experience. We don’t know where the spirit will lead us. Who would have thought, years ago, that each of us would be here sitting here, today.

When you think of all the decisions (some small, some big) that have brought us to this point; here, this place, this moment, this community. It might have been a vision like Isaiah to which you responded with ‘Here am I, send me’; it might have been a personal meeting – a moment that changed your life for ever; it might have been that gradually you have come to recognise the gentle wind of the spirit blowing, bending the direction of your life in a certain direction.

But what we do know is...we are here, now; and whatever our image of God – in each case there is a call, to each of us personally:

Somehow, somehow we have listened, heard, responded.

May God - the creator who is Other, the redeemer who we meet in a person, and the sustaining spirit whose effects we can see even though we don’t know where it comes from and don’t know where it is leading, May this God bless each of us, as we go forward together, listening, hearing, responding.