

## 6<sup>th</sup> February 2022 – Fourth Sunday before Lent

I understand that Boris Johnson sent out letters to his parliamentary Conservative party last week promising a change in direction and a more disciplined ethos in 10 Downing Street. Without trying to score political points, it's hard to see how that could be done without a complete change of heart in the person at the top – and even his friends and supporters agree that 'Boris is Boris' and isn't likely to change. That's enough politics. I don't intend to say more about it.

All three readings today are about finding one's way to that deep change of heart. I am reminded of the word repentance; in the New Testament the word used is *metanoia*. Erik Varden, a Benedictine monk, wrote about repentance or *metanoia* in *The Tablet*. He contrasts *metanoia* with the English word paranoia to which it is almost exactly opposite. A paranoid person – as seen most seriously in schizophrenia – is someone whose ideas are a bit off beam, whose 'sense of existence' is soaked in the unreal. Christ, he suggests is calling us to be not paranoid but the opposite – 'metanoid' – that is, for our sense of existence to be soaked in the truly real. While staying true to ourselves we to let ourselves be drawn into a higher degree of reality, understanding the world about and within us in the light of Christ's reality. We are to be re-created. That, he suggests, is what Christ means by *metanoia*, repentance.

Each of today's readings features such a change of heart.

First there's Isaiah. According to Josephus writing in the first century, King Uzziah was a fairly good King of Israel until around 750BC he went to the temple to burn incense. That was reserved for priests to do. The priest Azariah argued with him but Uzziah insisted. He was king and he would do as he liked. According to Josephus there was an earthquake. The roof of the temple fell in, sunlight shone through the damaged roof and where it shone on Uzziah's head he was struck by a skin disease. That meant he was ritually unclean and, as we have had to with covid, Uzziah had to self-isolate. He was exiled to outside the city and lived alone while his son Jotham reigned as Regent until 10 years later he died. That's the uneasy background to Isaiah's vision.

What Isaiah experienced in his vision was the majesty of God. He could only see the hem of God's robe but that was big enough to fill the temple. And Isaiah's vision of God – the smoke, the music of angels and seeing God's robe – gave him a sense of God's glory compared with his own littleness and uncleanness. For the Israelites the sense of uncleanness was part of being 'set apart'. Like King Uzziah, those with skin diseases were ritually 'unclean' and had to keep apart from the tribe or city.

When Isaiah said, 'I am a man of unclean lips,' he was aware of his humanity as something which could contaminate the holiness of God. Like King Uzziah, distanced because of his skin disease, Isaiah felt the need to distance himself from the presence of God. And Isaiah felt the same about the people around him. They also seemed unclean – inadequate in the presence of the glory of the Lord: 'I dwell among a people of unclean lips.' Reformation Protestants understood his sense of uncleanness and even the Anglican church today has traces of a sense of the body

as unholy and the soul set apart as clean and pure and Holy. This is not the Christian revelation but a heresy we share with Isaiah.

Where Isaiah experienced himself as unclean, Paul felt himself to be unworthy. He wrote that he was 'the last and the least Apostle' to see the risen Lord. His conversion experience on the Damascus road occurred after the resurrection appearances to the disciples and long after Christ's ascension. Paul also felt himself unworthy because of his earlier persecution of the Christians. Like Isaiah before him, Paul was painfully aware of the distance between himself and the glory of God.

In Peter, that sense of distance is explicit. We hear how the local carpenter-turned-rabbi was advising an experienced fisherman to try his nets again, in the wrong place and at the wrong time of day. And Peter did it. He was willing even at the beginning of his discipleship to follow Jesus's lead. And when he pulled in the nets with their miraculous catch, he recognised himself to be in the presence of the divine. His reaction, 'Go away from me Lord for I am a sinful man,' combines Isaiah's very Jewish sense of 'uncleanness', with Paul's sense of 'unworthiness.'

Three callings – and three similar reactions. Peter's, 'Go away I'm sinful;' Isaiah's, 'I'm unclean,' and Paul, 'I'm not worthy.'

But God doesn't go away. Instead, each of them experienced a repentance, a *metanoia*. They were, in Erik Varden's terms, drawn into a higher reality, seeing the world in God's light. They were re-created and sent out.

Isaiah was sent as prophet to the people of Israel. For Paul, consumed with guilt for his persecution of Christians, God revealed the grace and forgiveness of the resurrection so that enriched and confirmed as himself – 'By the grace of God I am what I am' – Paul was sent to spread news of the resurrection throughout the Mediterranean.

And Peter? One of the names of Christ is, *Emmanuel* 'God with us.' (Matthew 1. 23) Panicked, Peter shouted 'Go away Lord!' But God, Emmanuel, doesn't go away. Specifically, the incarnate God is the miracle of God coming to us. Jesus invited Peter to share his life. The words in Luke are 'they followed him.' Peter was drawn into Christ's life as he travelled with him, spending months listening, arguing, learning, drawn into a higher reality, being re-created.

Isaiah, Paul and Peter all encountered God. All three were first overwhelmed and then changed and 're-created.' All three were sent off in new direction. Isaiah as a prophet, Paul as an Apostle and Peter as a disciple.

We all live our lives at the boundary of what God has done and what God is about to do in our lives. Repentance, *metanoia*, is allowing ourselves to be drawn by God into a higher degree of reality. The future is made of new challenges and possibilities which we can see as scary and new and strange – or if we accept it is God's future, then we can be drawn, like Isaiah and Paul and Peter, into the new things God is doing.