

Today's Old Testament lesson is a very familiar passage which begins: 'In the year that King Uzziah died'. This bit is usually overlooked because of the dramatic nature of the rest of the passage. If we notice it at all, we probably think that Isaiah is just putting down a note about when his vision happened, much as we would describe something happening 'last Wednesday' or 'in the summer holidays'. But there is more to it than that. If you look at the story of Uzziah you will find something rather interesting. (It's in 2 Chronicles 26, if you want to look it up.)

Uzziah started off as a good king. He had substantial military success against the Philistines, he built strong fortifications in Jerusalem and the lands he conquered, he improved agriculture and he built up a large, properly-equipped army. Most importantly, he had been brought up to fear God and follow the Law, and he did so. But, like so many others, once he had become successful and powerful he got too big for his boots. He took a thurible — much like the one we use each Sunday — and went into the inner sanctuary of the Temple to offer incense to God. What was wrong with that? It wasn't his job. God lived in the inner sanctuary, and only the priests were allowed to go in there and 'see' God. The chief priest (with 80 other priests who were 'men of valour') remonstrated with him that only the properly-consecrated priests of the family of Aaron could go into the sanctuary and make the offerings. But instead of listening to them and leaving, Uzziah became angry. He was immediately struck with leprosy on his face. This made him unclean, so they immediately hurried him out of the Temple so that he wouldn't contaminate it. For the rest of his life he was confined to a house away from the palace and the Temple, and his son governed the country. When he died he was buried apart from his ancestors, so that he would not contaminate them.

So in the year that King Uzziah died the unfortunate history of someone who had arrogantly taken it upon himself to try to see God came to an end. He had reinforced the tradition and teaching that no-one could see God and live, unless God himself had explicitly chosen them (as, for example, with Moses and Elijah). This is why Isaiah, who was living at the time all this had happened and who was thoroughly familiar with the traditions and teachings of his religion, was so terrified. He was seeing God; a tremendously powerful figure surrounded by worshipping seraphs who themselves don't look directly at God — they cover their faces. They are engaged in continuous adoration and worship, and the words they use have stayed with us down the centuries. In a few minutes we shall sing them, as we do each Sunday, as part of the Eucharistic prayer. Isaiah knows what happens to people who see, or try to see, God. He immediately describes himself as unclean, which is what Uzziah became when he tried to muscle his way into the inner sanctuary.

But there is a fundamental difference between Uzziah and Isaiah. Uzziah tried to force his way into God's presence. Isaiah was given his vision; he didn't seek it. God had chosen him, and the consequences were therefore very different. Isaiah acknowledged his faults, and they were dramatically erased. He was able to respond to God's call. His 'Here I am; send me', is echoed five hundred years later by Mary's response to Gabriel's visit: 'Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word'.

I don't know whether you've noticed something particular about the pattern of the Christian year. We have many special festival days. Leaving aside the commemoration of apostles and saints, almost all of them relate to aspects of Jesus' life. The only exception is the celebration of the Holy Spirit, which we observe each year at Pentecost. But there is no one day on which we focus specifically on the sheer indescribably awesomeness of God the Father, perhaps because he is so almighty, so awesome and so indescribable. It is true that our worship is addressed to God. This morning we have already prayed to him (and will do so again); we have confessed to him, we have worshipped him in the opening words of the Gloria, and he will be present and mentioned in every element of the service. But much of this is 'through Jesus Christ'. We rarely, if ever, stop to think directly about God the Father. Jesus has brought us the new covenant, but the Father has not changed.

So perhaps on Trinity Sunday when we try to grasp the complex relationship of 'three persons in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit', we should try, maybe once every three years, to lose ourselves in worship as the seraphs in Isaiah's vision did. Our words will always be inadequate to describe God. In fact there is a whole branch of theology which tries to get rid of words altogether, because they inevitably limit and constrain what is necessarily unbounded. We must aim to become 'lost in wonder, love and praise'. But we have to begin somewhere, and today's psalm is a splendid start in its contrast of the power and force of the voice of God and the peace he gives his people. Or perhaps we could take the sentence we sometimes use at the offertory: 'Yours, Lord, is the greatness, the power, the glory, the splendour and the majesty'. It's very simple, and it says it all.