

## **Year B**

### **Isaiah 6:1-8**

How do we end our prayers so often? What do we pray? 'In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost'.

Ann Spivack wrote in a magazine article; "While our friends from India traveled around California on business, they left their 11 year-old daughter with us. Curious about my going to church one Sunday morning, she decided to come along. When we returned home, my husband asked her what she thought of the service.

"I don't understand why the West Coast isn't included too," she replied. When we inquired what she meant, she added, "You know, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the whole East Coast."<sup>1</sup>

This Trinity thing can be confusing, can't it. Is the Eternal Functional Submission of the Son taught in Scripture? The Bible indicates that the Son submits to the Father while he is incarnate (John 5:19 and so on), and that he continues to into the future (1 Corinthians 15:27-28). But does it also teach that he has done so from eternity past? Is

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<sup>1</sup> Ann Spivack, Reader's Digest.

the Eternal Functional Submission of the Son novel? That is: was it articulated, or even entertained, in the ancient church, or by the Reformers? Is the Eternal Functional Submission of the Son heterodox, or even heretical? The debate began with a claim that Eternal Functional Submission is not just wrong, but that it involves “reinventing God”, producing a different deity to the God of Nicene orthodoxy. Is there a separation of the divine will? Here’s the point many critics of Eternal Functional Submission are making: for the Son to submit to the Father’s authority, there must be a distinction

between the will of the Father and the will of the Son (otherwise submission would make no sense). Which is fine, as long as we're talking about Christ after the incarnation, since Christ has two wills. But if we're talking about Christ before the incarnation, then we're saying the eternal God has two wills—and that is a denial of divine simplicity. Does the Eternal Functional Submission of the Son imply that Christ only had one will? This is the flip-side of the previous point. Take the Gethsemane prayer: was Jesus saying “not the will of the Son, but the will of the Father,” or “not my human

will, but your (and in fact my) divine will”? If the former, as some Eternal Functional Submission advocates have argued, does that lead to the conclusion that Christ had just one will? Does the Eternal Functional Submission of the Son involve denying the Eternal Generation of the Son? And so it goes on.... Are you asleep yet? What a travesty that the nature of our God is reduced to intellectual conundrums. And then we find the glorious Isaiah passage to deliver us from conundrums on this Trinity Sunday. The heavenly council vision of Isaiah long preceded the Trinitarian debates

of the early Church which led to decisive action at the Council of Nicaea in 325AD. This great Isaiah passage was important in all the deliberations but nowhere within it do we find theological gymnastics. God did not become a Trinity at the Council of Nicaea. His nature is eternal and in this vision of Isaiah we are offered a glimpse into eternity. But it is not offered so that we can merely gaze and pontificate. It is offered so that we learn to live in the reality of the eternal God - Holy, holy, holy - one in three persons. All of this is experienced in the context of worship. All of our worship services are shaped by this

reality. Sometimes traditional worship services are criticised because they are thought to be too samey - hymn, prayer sandwiches, some will say. But the shape of our worship must not be dictated by our whim or taste it should be responsive to the presence of God. We trust that every service of worship here will involve an encounter with God, a time of confession before him, a receiving of his word and then a response to his call to serve him. All of that is found in this divine meeting with Isaiah. Let's look briefly at each of these elements of worship.

First, we have an encounter. God always encounters us in our context, where we are. He may take us somewhere else in worship but that is where he meets us. Isaiah's vision took place in the year that King Uzziah died. That gives us an immediate historical context that helps us to understand the significance of what happens. King Uzziah died in 740BC. He reigned for fifty-two years and his reign was blessed with material prosperity but he became arrogant and proud and tried to manipulate the religion away from the worship of God and onto himself. It is no accident then when Isaiah



encounters God he is bowled over by his unique holiness. All earthly competitors including the recently deceased king must bow before the enthroned God. Every time we meet together for worship we call on the living God to meet us and we respond the only way we can in confession; “Woe is me, I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips”.

Second, God’s word is revealed in our worship. Scottish Presbyterianism has a strong preaching tradition which is mirrored in the architecture of many of its buildings. A St. Gerardine Primary School pupil asked me recently on a visit to the church, ‘why do

ministers speak away up there?’ pointing to the pulpit. It’s not that they are ten feet above contradiction but because the preached word is believed to be one of the prime ways in which the word of God is revealed to the people. Isaiah’s confession is followed by forgiveness and cleansing and then he is ready to receive the challenge of God’ word. For us, preaching is very important but it is not everything. We receive in other ways and most significantly for the Christian that will be through the Sacraments as well. Baptism, the once in a lifetime initiation, and Holy Communion

when we keep coming back for more of Christ's presence and blessing. Then third, the challenge is to respond by serving. Here I am Lord. Any hint that Christianity might be about a mental agreement with God is dismissed here. It is about serving him.

During the deepest, darkest days of apartheid when the South African government tried to shut down opposition by cancelling a political rally, Archbishop Desmond Tutu declared that he would hold a church service instead.

St. George's Cathedral in Cape Town, South Africa was filled with worshippers. Outside

the cathedral hundreds of police gathered, a show of force intended to intimidate. As Tutu was preaching they entered the Cathedral, armed, and lined the walls. They took out notebooks and recorded Tutu's words.

But Tutu would not be intimidated. He preached against the evils of apartheid, declaring it could not endure. At one extraordinary point he addressed the police directly.

'You are powerful. You are very powerful, but you are not gods and I serve a God who cannot be mocked. So, since you've already

lost, since you've already lost, I invite you today to come and join the winning side!'

With that the congregation erupted in dance and song.

The police didn't know what to do. Their attempts at intimidation had failed, overcome by the archbishop's confidence that God and goodness would triumph over evil. It was but a matter of time.<sup>2</sup>

That's the lesson of Isaiah 6. That's what the worship of a Trinitarian God is all about. It is not about endless debates over nature and will. It is about called people, forgiven and

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<sup>2</sup> reported in Jim Wallis, *God's Politics*

cleansed by God who receive his word and go  
out and make a difference. May we be  
inspired to live in that way today. Amen.