

The Holy Trinity + May 27, 2018

Every Sunday we sing the Sanctus. The Sanctus is part of the Great Thanksgiving, and Christians have been singing it in some form or another since the fourth century. The word Sanctus means “holy.” That is what we sing in the first part of the hymn: “Holy, holy, holy Lord, Lord God of power and might. Heaven and earth are full of your glory.”

As the preface says, we join our song to the eternal song of the heaven and earth: “With all the choirs of angels, with the church on earth and the hosts of heaven, we praise your name and joining their unending hymn.”

Now, during the first part of the Sanctus you may have noticed that the Assisting Minister and the Presiding Minister bow with a deep and profound bow. You can bow there too. It is much like the bowing we do toward the cross in procession or the bowing toward one another in exchanges between the Presider and the assembly. It’s just one example of how we worship with our bodies, not merely words alone.

It’s altogether fitting to bow when we sing “Holy, holy, holy Lord, God.” To bow before God is to revere God, to give God honor, praise, and gratitude. Such a gesture nurtures among us a sense of wonder and awe.

Do you suppose Isaiah bowed when he saw the God of hosts in all of God’s glory? The story doesn’t say, but we sure do get the sense that Isaiah felt small in the presence of the mighty God. In Isaiah’s grand vision, the temple becomes the heavenly court. The seraphim, the high rung of the order of angels, call out their praises. The temple shakes and is filled with smoke. The Lord sits on a throne high and lofty and the hem of the Lord’s robe fills the temple. The first part of the Sanctus is, in fact, from this very story. We sing the song of the seraphs: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.”

The angels sing at the sight of the awesome God. The sight of God is almost too much to bear. Even the seraphs, God’s courtiers, cover their faces. Isaiah, upon seeing the God of all glory and might, feels lost and unworthy. A man with “unclean lips.” We don’t know if Isaiah bowed, but he certainly felt humbled.

There is something about worshipping God in all of God's holiness that calls us to a posture of awe and mystery. Sometimes, I think that sense of awe gets lost when churches get too casual. Nurturing a sense of awe is important and not merely because God deserves our praise. We need it. I think there is, even beneath the most casual demeanor, a yearning for the holy, a hunger for an intersection between heaven and earth and to actually part of something greater than ourselves.

So, we worship God with beauty, awe, reverence and this runs throughout the liturgy, but that's not all there is. Worship includes other expressions.

You may have noticed that when the Assisting Minister and Presiding Minister bow at the first part of the Sanctus they don't in that position too long. When we sing "Hosanna!" we lift our heads and when we sing "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord," we make the sign of the Cross. That's because the one who comes in God's name is Jesus Christ and these words of praise recall Palm Sunday.

With Isaiah and all the heavenly host we sing "holy." With the crowds who waved palms and welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem, we sing "Hosanna!"

No, we do not remain in a perpetual bow. We lift our heads and hearts in thanksgiving. Yes, like Isaiah, we've seen a vision of the holy God but unlike Isaiah, the vision of God isn't high and lofty. Rather, the vision we've seen is a God who is bound to earth. We've seen God's glory all right but God isn't sitting on a high and lofty throne. Instead the vision we've seen is God in Jesus splayed out on a cross with arms stretched out in mercy. God with a human face and a humble form wearing a crown of thorns.

Do you see? In one song, the Sanctus, we both honor the God above us AND we praise the God who has come to dwell with us. It isn't an either/or but a both/and. God eludes and God touches us.

We may bow but we need not cover our faces.

One of things I will miss the most about Valerie is how she honors, through music, the vast mystery of God in all of its textures. She helps us worship God in many keys.

Why, in one liturgy, we may find ourselves expressing the whole gamut of worship: praise, hope, comfort, peace, challenge, lament, gratitude, grief, sorrow and joy with music that lifts our hearts in soaring praise, brings consolation to hurting hearts, bring the heart to a contemplative place, and stirs the heart with all kinds of musical genres and great diversity.

Music for all time and seasons and music that honors and worships who is known in a variety of notes and keys and chords, just as the scriptures and the prayers make use of many images and evoke many thoughts and feelings.

Isn't that the beauty of the Holy Trinity? God cannot be consigned to one image or one word and the interplay and mutual indwelling and love of the three persons of the Trinity reveal a God who is both with us and greater than us, who can never be contained but still deigns to touch us, and we are saved from a one dimensional faith and find ourselves living within mystery.

When Isaiah saw God in all that glory, he confessed that he was a man of unclean lips, that God's people had ceased trusting God. Now, whether he bowed or cowered, who knows, but Isaiah knew in his vision of God that he sure wasn't God, and there in the temple Isaiah changed, not because of something he did or said. God changed him!

One of the seraphs comes to him with a hot burning coal to touch his lips. Suddenly the man with unclean lips turns to praise and Isaiah is made a prophet of God. God sends him to be a messenger.

Today we are not touched with hot burning coal, but by Jesus, who comes to us in the name of the Lord touches our lips with the bread of heaven and the cup of salvation. Jesus is brought to our lips and we are made clean and new. And we are sent. Rising from the table we go forth to bow before our neighbors in love and mercy and this delights the heart of God and makes the angels sing! Amen.