

Lent Reflections on the Stained-Glass Windows



Seraphim

Thursday after Ash Wednesday

Reading: Isaiah 6

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. ² Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.”

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

Commentary

Seraphim are the first in the highest rank of angels, followed by Cherubim and Thrones. All are pure spirits of contemplation, adoring and participating in the Divine life.

The prophet Isaiah, in the 8th century BC, had the earliest known vision of angels while worshipping in the Temple in Jerusalem. In his vision, he saw the six-winged seraphim worshipping before the Lord on his heavenly throne and heard each crying out to each, with voices that shook the foundations of the building. Their words have been included in liturgies ever since: ‘Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory.’

Isaiah in his mystical vision perceives that angelic praise is at the heart of all creation and from this heavenly praise flows all that is. From their close presence to the throne of God, the fiery seraphim (the word means ‘fiery,’ or ‘burning ones.’) look out onto the whole world and see that it is full of the glory of the Lord. It is not just the Temple that is filled with God’s presence, but the whole world and in fact, the whole of Isaiah’s being.

A seraph touches Isaiah’s lips with a glowing coal from the altar as a sign that his sins have been forgiven. The seraphim are intimately connected with Divine holiness as well as God’s glorious mercy and love. Isaiah does not just gaze on the heavenly worship as an enthusiastic bystander but becomes part of it. Touched by fire, Isaiah himself becomes an ‘angel’ in the sense of a ‘messenger of the Lord.’

Yet, to contemplate God in the fullness of love, to glimpse the majesty, glory and holiness of God in worship, is to be aware, like Isaiah, of our unworthiness and sinfulness. St Peter felt the same in the presence of Christ: “Lord leave me, for I am a sinful man” (Luke 5:8).

Yet in this experience of frailty and weakness, Isaiah (and Peter) is called to be the messenger of God. Worship gives way to vocation, a sense of being called into the service of God.

Meditation

Isaiah describes in a poetic way his wonder at the magnitude of God and the Temple, and even Isaiah himself, is filled with God's presence.

The poet R. S. Thomas speaks of such an encounter with God in which he doesn't look with the eyes but with his whole being.

*I looked
at him, not with the eye
only, but with the whole
of my being, overflowing with
him as a chalice would
with the sea.
(from the poem 'Suddenly')*

Spend time today being quiet in the presence of God and acknowledging His love.

Say slowly in adoration the words of the seraphim which we use at Holy Communion: Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts, Heaven and earth are full of thy glory.

We should often perform acts of love and ask Christ the King of Love never to let the sacred fire of His love be extinguished in our souls.

Prayer

O thou who camest from above
the fire celestial to impart,
kindle a flame of sacred love
on the mean altar of my heart!

There let it for thy glory burn
with inextinguishable blaze,
and trembling to its source return
in humble prayer and fervent praise.

Jesus, confirm my heart's desire
to work, and speak, and think for thee;
still let me guard the holy fire,
and still stir up the gift in me.

Ready for all thy perfect will,
my acts of faith and love repeat;
till death thy endless mercies seal,
and make the sacrifice complete.

Charles Wesley 1707-88