

There's a lot to choose from this week – the nature of the Trinity; the story of Nicodemus; and the call of Isaiah!

I have a soft spot for Nicodemus. John's Gospel seems to present him as rather dumb. He just didn't "get" what Jesus said to him. I'm a bit like Nicodemus. I tend to take things literally (which often drives Michelle nuts). So when Jesus told Nicodemus to be born again, what the heck did he mean? Nicodemus replied, "Come off it; no way anyone can be born again. Being born is a one-off event." Even then, Jesus did not give Nicodemus a straight answer; he launched into a discussion about being born of water and of a Spirit that blows wherever it wants to. No wonder Nicodemus was puzzled! He did not have a lifetime of sermons about a new life in Jesus Christ to fall back on to figure out what Jesus meant when he talked about being born again. Yet we know that he received a call to follow Jesus, because we next meet him bringing spices to anoint Jesus' body after his crucifixion.

Many Christians use the words 'born again' as a kind of code for a spiritual rebirth – a spiritual new beginning. Some use the term even more narrowly to mean a sudden and profound conversion to Christianity. When I was a student chaplain at Guelph General Hospital, I once (and I mean once) visited a man in his late 80's. His first words to me were, rather aggressively, "Are you born again?" I knew what was coming. He didn't like my answer, and told me that no, he didn't want to talk to me; no, he didn't want me to say a prayer with him; and no, he didn't want me to come back another day.

The Isaiah reading is a very clear "call". This passage was the first Scripture that I read publicly; I recall that I managed to mispronounce King Uzziah's name. Isaiah remembered that his vision took place in the year that King Uzziah died – 742 BCE in our calendar. Isaiah was either actually in the Temple, or imagined himself to be there. He saw heavenly beings who proclaimed the greatness of God, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts ..." The incense was so thick that the Temple seemed to be full of smoke and even the pillars holding up the Temple seemed to shake.. Isaiah realized that God was calling him, but like so many other Biblical characters, and like us, he made an excuse – "Woe is me; I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell among a people of unclean lips." In other words, his excuse was, "I'm not worthy to preach on God's behalf." Then, in the vision, one of the heavenly beings touched Isaiah's lips with a hot coal, and said that the hot coal had burned away his uncleanness. It was time to stop making excuses about being unworthy or unable to do anything. Finally, he heard a voice from God, "Whom shall I send; who will go out for me?" Isaiah realized that he had a choice – to accept God's call or ignore it. He replied, "Here am I; send me." Not, "Here am I; send someone else." The rest of the book tells how Isaiah went about his prophetic mission.

Isaiah's vision doesn't appear until Chapter 6 of the book. Before that, the book offers a polemic about how Isaiah saw the wickedness of the Judah of his own day. People were arrogant; they did not care for the less fortunate. It was as if the nation that had been described as God's fruitful vineyard had become overgrown with thorns. But so far, Isaiah hadn't been doing anything about it. Before he had his vision, he was like a newspaper columnist who rails against what is wrong with Canada in the op-ed pages of the newspaper – in other words, someone who is an armchair quarterback.

Whether we are at the start of our faith journeys or whether we have been plugging away at it for a long time, we never know whether we might get a 'call' to do something radically new. It might seem

to come as a call from God, or it might seem to have a more mundane origin.

Going back to Nicodemus' visit to Jesus, the account ends at verse 16 with the famous line, 'God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.' It is so well known that many Christians use 'John 3: 16' as a shorthand for the statement itself. John 3:16 and Isaiah's vision represent complementary aspects of what it means to be Christian, both of them valid and authentic. John 3:16 speaks to our personal faith life. Believe in me, and in the message that I offer in the Gospels, says Jesus, and you are assured that there is more to life than just physical existence. As we saw last week, belief in Jesus was what led the crowd that listened to Peter deciding that they should get baptized at Pentecost.

Isaiah's experience speaks to how our faith plays out in the world. It's not enough to be an armchair quarterback. This is the "deeds" in the slogan "Deeds not Creeds." The Epistle of James put it, "Faith without works is dead." A modern version is 'walk the walk not just talk the talk.' Today we bless the food for St. Matthew's House, serving one of the poorest areas in Hamilton. The food did not get in front of the altar to be blessed today because parishioners just thought that it's a shame that some people go to bed hungry. It got there because our parishioners did something about it; they bought the food and brought it here to be blessed. They followed the challenge that Jesus gave us when he asked these questions: "Did you feed me when I was hungry; did you welcome me when I was a stranger?"

John 3:16 didn't say that God ran the world, or organized the world, but that God loved the world. To have brought the food to be blessed is an expression of love for other people. Love, meaning care and respect for others. Love, meaning kindness and being prepared to put others ahead of oneself.

That brings me to last weekend, when the Episcopal Bishop Michael Curry stole the show at the royal wedding with his homily on love. I don't have Bishop Curry's sonorous deep voice, but I would like to repeat in today's context some of the things that he said about love. He first quoted the two great Commandments about loving God and loving your neighbour as yourself. Then he went on:

- "Someone once said that Jesus began the most revolutionary movement in human history – a movement grounded in the unconditional love of God for the world - and a movement mandating people to live that love, and in so doing to change not only their lives but the very life of the world itself.
- I'm talking about power ... to change the world. If you don't believe me, just stop and imagine. Think and imagine a world where love is the way. Imagine our homes and families where love is the way. Imagine neighbourhoods and communities where love is the way. Imagine governments and nations where love is the way. Imagine business and commerce where this love is the way.
- When love is the way, then no child will go to bed hungry in this world ever again. When love is the way, poverty will become history. When love is the way, the earth will be a sanctuary. Because when love is the way, we actually treat each other well ... like we are actually family. My brothers and sisters, that's a new heaven, a new earth, a new world, a new human family."

Amen.