

The Craziness of God

*A sermon preached at Lindfield Uniting Church on Sunday 6 February 2022, by
David Gill. Readings for the 5th Sunday after Epiphany were Isaiah 6:1-8, 1
Corinthians 15:1-11 and St Luke 5:1-11*

Sometimes God behaves in ways that are just plain crazy. Especially where people are concerned.

An example. This year brings the 57th anniversary of my ordination. It was 27 May 1965 – that year, Ascension Day. I remember vividly kneeling before the holy table of Canterbury Congregational Church in Melbourne, while a dozen ministers – all in black, in those days – gathered around for the laying on of hands

The ordination prayer was said. I discovered that a dozen enthusiastic hands on one's head weigh a ton. The place had that typical churchy aroma – a subtle mix of ancient furniture polish, long ignored dust and old hymn books. Most of all I remember two conflicting thoughts that, as I knelt there, were running through my mind. One part of me was saying “Yes, this feels right, this is what my life is for”. Another part was asking “What the hell is a guy like me doing in a situation like this?”

That tension, I confess, lives on to this day. And not only in me. Not only in those of us who happen to be clergy. It's in many of us – it should be in *all* of us -- who dare to call ourselves Christians.

After all, in the sacrament of baptism, we've all been ordained into Christ's ongoing ministry to the world. We're

all signed with the sign of the cross. All commissioned to serve. And all living in the sometimes unbearable tension between who we are and who we are called to become. It's a problem. But not a new one. Recall the three readings we heard this morning. They speak to the bits of us that feel we are spiritual failures, the times we know we're not capable of doing anything much for God. At least, so we imagine. Cast your mind back to the first reading.

Young Isaiah, being dragged screaming into the role of prophet. He has an overwhelming vision of divine glory. Significantly, he is in the temple, the holiest of places. The hem of God's robe – only the hem, mind you – fills the temple. Even the seraphim – mystical heavenly beings in attendance on God – must shield their eyes from the mystery. They sing words of awe that are familiar to us because we echo them, all these centuries later, as we approach holy communion: "Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might. Heaven and earth are full of your glory." A glorious vision, and it leads to an equally upbeat conclusion. God ponders "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Isaiah responds enthusiastically "Here I am, send me!"

The heart of the drama is what separates the vision from the volunteering. For Isaiah's glimpse of God leaves him overwhelmed by a sense of unworthiness, personal and communal too. "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!"

Note what happens next. Or rather what doesn't happen next. Isaiah does not fall to his knees pleading for forgiveness. He does not seek absolution. He does not resort to one of Judaism's rituals of cleansing. He does not do ... anything. Maybe divine forgiveness just doesn't seem possible. Maybe he thinks his sin is unforgivable. Whatever the reason, he is frozen, transfixed by the awesome contrast between God's majesty and our human reality. So, paralysis. He is stuck.

Enter God, expressed in the poetic imagery of those days. One of the seraphim, the heavenly beings, takes a coal from the altar in the holy of holies. He touches Isaiah's lips, and quotes from one of the temple's rituals of forgiveness. "Your guilt has departed," he announces. "Your sin is blotted out!"

What Isaiah could not bring himself to ask for, what perhaps he did not imagine was possible, he has received. A new beginning! And all through an initiative that lay entirely with God.

It was forgiveness unsought, mercy undeserved, acceptance unexpected, compassion unimagined, love unearned. It was sheer grace. And it was liberating. Then we heard the second reading.

Paul was in a ludicrous situation. He'd been a persecutor of the church – and given what we know of the man, probably a very effective persecutor. Now, he's a trusted leader of those very Christians he once persecuted. Crazy!

Paul acknowledges the absurdity. He knows it doesn't make sense. But, he says, "by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain". Once again, an unlikely person has been set free to serve. And once again, the initiative that freed him lay not with himself, but with God.

Then came the third reading, from Luke's gospel.

Jesus - it's still early in his work - is talking about reaching out to people. Where is he? In a fishing boat, that's the first surprise. Not a palace or a temple, a fishing boat. Who is he talking to? Not the movers and shakers of the day. Just a dozen nobodies – four fishermen, a tax collector and for the rest we're not told. Nobodies.

What an absurd way to start a spiritual revolution. And what a bunch of no-hopers they would turn out to be: slow to get the message, soon to be jostling each other for importance, eventually betraying Jesus, denying him, going to sleep when he needed them most. Crazy.

But back to that boat. Jesus, a carpenter who we can assume knows nothing much about fishing, tells these professionals how to fish, and the results are astounding. There is a big haul, a miracle – wah! Peter, their leader, is overwhelmed. "Go away from me, Lord," he pleads. "I am

a sinful man!” Jesus, ignoring Peter’s hang-up about being sinful, simply offers reassurance. “Don’t be afraid. From now on you’re catching people.” It’s grace, again. Set free to serve.

Isaiah? Paul? Peter? That bunch of rather dense backsliders we call the disciples? It makes no sense. It’s ridiculous. Sheer madness. And the absurdities didn’t stop there. Through the millennia since, and still today, this crazy God has continued to do significant things using the most inappropriate people. Like ... us!

“This crazy God”? Paul put it another way. He spoke not about divine madness, but about divine grace. Sheer, unearned, uncalculating, unbounded, unimaginable grace. Grace that takes initiatives we can’t. Grace that refuses to see anyone as a nobody. Grace that never dwells on weaknesses, but sees each and every person in terms of who he or she could be. Grace that is simply the mystery of love.

One of the key moments in any service of worship comes when we share the peace. It’s not just another greeting. Think of where it comes. We’ve confessed our sin and heard of God’s forgiveness – or perhaps we’re just about to move into holy communion. Then, “The peace of the Lord be always with you”.

We turn to say that to each other. It’s not an opportunity for a general catch-up: “Hi nice to see you again”. “How are the kids going at school?” “Who’s on coffee this morning,

O my God is it me?" No, we look into each other's eyes with a prayer that's saying: "May the peace of God's liberating grace be yours".

That moment is repeated at the end of the service. The blessing – "The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds ...". Then the charge --"Go in peace, the peace of God's liberating grace, to love and serve the Lord".

Next time you find yourself wondering what on earth you're doing, here in this or any other church. Next time you ask yourself why flawed people like you, like us, should be seeking to worship and serve this holy God.

Remember that, against all the odds, like Isaiah Paul and Peter long ago, like all the saints of centuries past and the present time, saints all with feet of clay just like ours, you and I are the astonished beneficiaries of

- * forgiveness we dared not seek,
- * mercy we did not deserve,
- * acceptance we never expected,
- * compassion we could not imagine,
- * and love we could never have earned.

We too have been embraced by the craziness of God. By the wonder of amazing grace. And – here's the craziest thought of all – each one of us has been given God's work to do.

The peace of the Lord be always with you!

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