

6 Pentecost 2003
"God Hangs with The Humble "
The Rev. Thomas W Simmons

Last week I showed you the contents of this envelope. Do you remember what it was? It showed us "what it's all for." Everything God does is "for the praise of his glory." He created the cosmos – he created US – to revel with him in his glory.

Our lessons this morning continue the theme. They tell us about God and his people. They show us that this glorious, high and holy God dwells with humble people who will hang together. Did you get that? **This glorious, high and holy God dwells with humble people who will hang together.**

The story begins in Isaiah. I just love how he describes God and his people. "For thus says the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place...and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit." We learn something here about God...and his people.

We'll start with God. I'm struck by how God can do it all. He's both Big and Far-out AND Close and Compassionate. I don't know if you've noticed, but most religions say god is EITHER "out there," OR "in here."

In Islam, for instance, God is so Big, he's so Other that we can barely conceive of him, much less see him or BE with him in this life. He's there and we are here and there's no bridging the gap short of death. Other religions like Buddhism or Hinduism say that God is "in here", in the divine spark in human beings and suffusing everything.

But Judaism and Christianity are unique in saying that **God is BOTH far and near**. It's obvious in Isaiah's statement, which says it so beautifully. "I dwell in the high and holy place...and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit." This anticipates the day when **God was going to LITERALLY come down to us** in Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus lived and died as one of us. He had compassion on us for we are like sheep without a shepherd. He came to gather the scattered flock. That's how Mark describes Jesus in our Gospel.

Paul in our Epistle lesson points to Jesus' work on the cross. Here we see the highness of God brought down to the lowest conceivable level, suffering death on the cross for us. Going to hell to bring us to heaven, suffering death to bring us life. **That's the kind of God we have.** Infinitely high, infinitely humble. And he's looking for a people among whom he can dwell. This glorious, high and holy God dwells with humble people who will hang together.

So now let's look at the character of God's people. Isaiah says that they are

humble and Paul says that they hang together. Let's start with Isaiah. God says, "I will dwell with the humble and contrite in spirit."

What does this mean? The dictionary defines **humble** as, "modest, having a feeling of insignificance, inferiority, low rank, lowly, plain, common or poor." Hmm, OK. And **contrite** is defined as, "overcome by a sense of guilt, showing remorse and seeking atonement." Hmm. Does that describe you?

In our collect this morning we prayed a contrite and humble prayer. Did you hear it? **We acknowledged some unflattering things about ourselves.** "You know our *necessities* before we ask and our *ignorance* in asking; have compassion on our *weakness*, and mercifully give us those things which for our *unworthiness* we dare not, and our *blindness* we cannot ask." Hmm: ignorance, weakness, unworthiness and blindness. Do you feel these things?

Or think of our prayer of general confession we pray together each week. "We confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word and deed by what we have done and left undone...." That about covers it. "We are truly sorry and we humbly repent."

We are acknowledging, with Isaiah, that we a weak and wayward people who "keep turning back to our own ways," and are habitually falling short of God's standards, his design and glory. **It's like we can't help ourselves**; and the harder we try to worse we fail. We need help from God! That's humble and contrite. Do you ever feel like that?

But you know, these attributes aren't really valued in our culture today, are they? Do they ever come up in a job description? Modern Americans value fast-talking, competitive, self-starters with attitude, independence, spunk and a drive to succeed. **To modern eyes the humble and contrite look like capital L losers!**

But God thinks otherwise. He sees something in them that he can work with, a willingness and openness, a responsiveness and desire for God. **So he speaks peace to the humble.** He heals, leads and revives them and comes down to dwell in their midst. This glorious, high and holy God gathers us into a community that worships, serves and trusts him and is committed to each other. Paul tells us about it.

It's a diverse bunch that hangs together. Did you see that in Paul's letter? He describes how God gathers the humble and contrite of the world from "far" and "near." "He preached peace to those who were far away and to those who were near." **He's talking about Jews and Gentiles here, gathered into one people.**

Now this is like mixing oil and water. There are few divisions deeper in human history than between Jews and Gentiles back then. A Jew couldn't even enter a Gentile's house. But now the hostility has been put to death in the body of Christ

on the cross. Jesus has brought the two together into “one new humanity.”

That’s interesting: a NEW HUMANITY. What’s that? That’s what God’s after. **He wants to transform the human race into a people who join him** in enjoying his glory, sharing in his companionship and doing the work he has given us to do.

He has to break down all the boundaries that divide us: national, ethnic, political, gender, cultural, class and make us one with him and each other. If he can get Jews and Gentiles together he can get ANYONE together – even democrats and republicans. That’s what Jesus did in his flesh and blood on the cross.

And now God can joyfully dwell in our midst and make us the beautiful holy temple that Paul describes. It isn’t built on looking alike, talking alike – *or walking alike – spending alike, or voting alike.* It’s built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ himself being the chief cornerstone. **That’s the structure we build as we are Building Christians for Service.**

How does all this shake together for us here at St Pete’s? **Our society works very hard to make people feel good.** Our institutions are almost obsessively concerned with positive reinforcement, equal treatment, self-esteem, affirmation, and going to great lengths to help people feel good about themselves.

But I think at the heart of God dwelling with a humble community of people is something quite different: **a recognition of weakness and fault.** That’s what the humble and contrite do. Instead of hiding their weaknesses, protecting, deceiving and worrying about them, they recognize their weakness and trust in the strength, help, redeeming power and presence of God. Isaiah says that’s how we are able to live with God.

The same is true of living in a Christian community. **To hang together we must be humble and contrite.** That’s what Paul is talking about when he reminds the Gentiles in the Church in Ephesus that they were once strangers and aliens without hope and without God in this world. It seems they have forgotten this and gotten over the humility and contrition that first brought them to God. So Paul reminds them and us.

To live in community with people different from you requires humility and contrition and an acknowledgement of personal weakness and fault. That’s important to remember as the unity of the Anglican Communion is threatened by controversy and schism. **It’s the only way to keep things hanging together.**

God says, "For thus says the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place...and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit." This glorious, high and holy God dwells with humble people who will hang together. Lord make is so here at St Peter’s, in the Diocese of Virginia, at General Convention and in our Anglican Communion. AMEN