

Readings: Isaiah 6:1-8; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11

I wonder if you have ever had a life changing encounter.

Life changing encounters can and do happen all the time. I got friendly with a nun and she told me her story. She felt very strongly that God was calling her to be a nun but she was fighting it. You can understand why. She imagined life ahead of her - getting married, having kids, settling down. But deep within her was this call and she couldn't make it go away. So, she prayed, "If this is of you God, give me a sign." That morning during her break at work she popped into the Cathedral in the Square. Because they were preparing for the Antarctica service there, right in the doorway, was a large stuffed emperor penguin. "You win" she said to God. "I'm your next penguin."

Today's Bible readings are all about life changing encounters with God. Isaiah, they think was a priest and he lived in the temple. He was praying. Suddenly he had an overwhelming sense of the majesty and the mystery of God. He had a window onto the worship of heaven. This is one of the best-known bits of the Old Testament. Isaiah is caught up in the heavenly worship where God is not a little bit holy, but three times holy, holy, holy. His words have become for us the "Sanctus" that Anglicans pray at every eucharist: *Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory.* Like my friend, Isaiah initially resisted his call before giving himself over to God - but not as a penguin.

In our second reading Paul is also reflecting on his life changing encounter. It has all the same elements: God comes to him in his everyday life. He is walking on a road after persecuting a bunch of Christians. Again, it's as if heaven has come to earth and the light is so bright for him on the road to Damascus that he is temporarily blinded. Like Isaiah he is aware of his unworthiness and like Isaiah he follows with all his heart - but not as a penguin.

Luke records for us the next life changing encounter. This time it is Simon (soon to be Peter) encountering Jesus. Again, it's an ordinary day. Simon is fishing. Heaven and earth seem to come together but then they always do around Jesus. Jesus does probably the only thing that would really impress this hardened fisherman. He overwhelms him with a catch. A catch of fish that fills all their boats to the brim. Remember Peter and his mates don't fish for pleasure, their lives and the lives of their families depend on it. To go all night without fish would have meant no food. As with Paul and Isaiah, Peter senses his total unworthiness and then he gives his life for this Jesus. Later he does give his life literally for Jesus - but not as a penguin.

By now we are getting a pretty good picture of how God changes lives. God comes to us in the ordinary. God comes to us and confirms our call. We can feel very unworthy when it happens and not up to the task but God empowers us to do what we are called to do.

I want to suggest something that you may never have thought of. I want to suggest that through us God is able to change other people's lives for the better. When we follow this Jesus, he sets us on a path that gives life and hope and healing to others even when we don't realise it.

Dorothy tells the story of her life changing encounter.

"I grew up knowing I was different, and I hated it. I was born with a cleft palate and when I started school everyone teased me. I had garbled speech - even blowing up a balloon was more than I could do. When I tried to drink from the water fountain it spilled out my nose. By the age of 7 I had convinced myself that no one would ever love me, or even like me. And then I entered Mrs Leonard's class. I never knew her first name - she was round and pretty and smelt good and we all loved her.

The time came for the hearing tests. I was barely able to hear anything out of one ear but I was not about to let anyone find out. So, I cheated. I learned to watch the other kids. They did what was called the whisper test. Each kid went to the door of the classroom, turned sideways and put a finger in the other ear so as to block the sound. Then the teacher would whisper something and the child repeated it back. I discovered that they never checked how tight you put your finger in your ear, so I would hold it so I could still hear. The teacher would say things like, "The sky is blue." "Do you have new shoes?" My turn came. I turned my bad ear to her and pretended to plug the other. I waited and then the words came that God had surely put in her mouth, seven words that changed my life forever. Mrs Leonard my round pretty fragrant teacher whom I adored said softly, "I wish you were my little girl."

You see God's abundant grace is such that you never know the impact for good you are having on another's life. Would Isaiah have had any idea that 3000 years later one hundred million Anglicans would be quoting and calling to mind his vision every time we pray? Could Paul have dreamt that the vision he had of the Risen Christ made his letters such a powerful witness that they have become the most famous letters in all history? Could Peter have dreamt that a super big catch would set him on a path to faith that billions share today?

Would Mrs Leonard have ever dreamt that those seven words transformed Dorothy forever?

The good news is that God is still at work changing lives with powerful encounters, bringing life and hope and healing. And the greatest miracle of all is that God is doing these things through us!

The really good news is that you don't even need to become a penguin to do it.