

Isaiah 6:1

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord

Someone recently described a house to me as ‘Victorian’

- Although this would be nothing to people on the continent or in America
- It means something to most of us
- The person equally well have described the house as ‘nineteenth century’
- For Queen Victoria reigned from 1837 until her death on 22 January 1901
- But in a country with Kings and Queens we are accustomed to date things this way

The part of the Bible that we call Isaiah 6 tells of the death of a monarch

- Most of us have heard some sermons on Isaiah 6
- Especially the ‘Here am I. Send me’ bit
- Which is normally used to say we need more ministers, preachers, stewards
- Sunday school teachers, witnesses, evangelists or anything else that’s going
- But I don’t recall hearing any sermons on Isaiah 1-5

In some ways, I’m as bad, skipping over the first five chapters to get to familiar ground

- But unless we make at least a brief mention of the first five chapters
- How are we going to have any clue as to what Isaiah 6 is all about
- Is it really as simple as saying we need more church workers
- So to be faithful, just say, ‘here am I. Send me!’ and get on and do it?
- And was it just coincidental that all this happened in the year King Uzziah died?

The date of King Uzziah’s death is not all that clear but it does mark a milestone in history

- In Israel’s history this is the era of the divided Kingdom
- Israel in the North had broken away from the Jerusalem King
- Making its capital at Samaria, and after a succession of unrighteous Kings
- Israel will fall to the Assyrian Empire
- Judah in the South had remained loyal to the King at Jerusalem
- But, although Uzziah was one of the better Kings, Judah is also corrupt
- And (in what we call chapters 1-5) God has finally decided ‘enough is enough’

Judah is a rebellious nation, a sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt

- Worst of all, the people have turned their backs upon God
- Their worship has become meaningless – because of their hypocrisy
- God has pleaded with them on many occasions to know his forgiveness and cleansing
- But the people have resisted and rebelled
- Therefore judgment is coming upon Jerusalem and Judah
- Every effort to minimise judgment is turned back
- For the prophet’s message now is one of doom

In the latter part of his reign King Uzziah had leprosy and Jotham ruled as regent

- From the death of King Uzziah onwards, Judah went downhill rapidly
- Jotham’s son Ahaz was one of the worst kings of Judah
- Allowing Judah to become a vassal state of Assyria and worshipping foreign gods
- Ahaz even allowed one of his sons to be offered as a child sacrifice (2 Kings 16:3)

If the age of Queen Victoria is regarded by many as the golden age of industry and empire

- The people in Judah would later look back to Uzziah's reign as being better days
- This solves the riddle as to why Isaiah's prophecy did not begin with chapter 6
- We can never understand what is going on here without the backdrop of chapters 1-5
- There is no evidence at all that this is Isaiah's first prophecy or even his call
- Normally on such occasions the one called thinks of all the reasons not to do it
- Rather it is his appointment to a particular task
- Realising the urgency of the divine imperative, Isaiah is ready to go
- Because he serves:

I A GOD WHO COMMUNICATES

King Uzziah reigned for a long time, more than half a century

- But eventually his reign came to an end with his death
- In some senses, King Uzziah died under a cloud, for he was shut up as a leper
- About the time of his death, Isaiah had a vision of God upon a throne
- For, as the Psalmist says:

Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal men, who cannot save. When their spirit departs, they return to the ground; on that very day their plans come to nothing. Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God, the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them - the LORD, who remains faithful for ever. (10) The LORD reigns for ever, your God, O Zion, for all generations.

(Psalm 146:3-6, 10)

In short, Judah's King had died but Judah's God still lived

- The vision of God's transcendence (otherness) never left Isaiah
- Drawn into the midst of the Divine Council he observed the glory of the King
- It is because of this that, like the serving spirits, he is prepared to do the King's will
- He becomes a part of God's plan and his work
- As the Apostle Paul would do many centuries later
- Telling of the heavenly vision authenticated him as God's genuine messenger

Whether or not Isaiah was literally at Jerusalem in the temple or simply had a vision

- Is not the important point here – what matters is all that the prophet sees
- He sees the Lord – there is an important and yet subtle distinction here
- In pure essence, no one could see God and live
- And yet it is very God that he sees, that is a theophany
- The glory of God, in a sense veiled, perhaps by the robe of his glory
- John's gospel explains this:

Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him.

(John 12:41)

It is the pre-existent and glorified Christ that Isaiah sees and to whom the angels cry 'holy'

- Just as John will later see and hear a similar angelic cry in Revelation (4:8)

If we needed incontestable proof of the divinity of the Saviour

- We need look no further
- For it is he who when, after his resurrection, sat down at the right hand of God
- Was glorified in the presence of the Father
- With the glory he had with the Father before the world began (John 17:5)

In short, the vision of Isaiah is a vision of the holiness and glory of God, glimpsed in Christ

- The one who is high and exalted and the train of whose robe fills the temple
- His glorious presence dominates the whole scene
- Around him the seraphs (seraphim) act as servants and messengers
- This is the only biblical passage where heavenly beings are called 'seraphs'
- The word literally means 'burning ones'
- Even though these angels have not fallen into sin, they cover their faces
- And, possibly in accordance with ancient eastern customs, also their feet

In the New Testament we discover that the angels are present at Christian worship

- And, consistently, Paul speaks of veiling and unveiling in the presence of God
- I am not looking to make this into a controversy about women covering their heads
- The kind of controversy that I think recognises the letter but misses the Spirit
- But I don't think it would do us any harm at all
- to focus more on the holiness and glory of God

In the council of the holy ones God is greatly feared; he is more
awesome than all who surround him.

(Psalm 89:7)

If angels are reverent in their attendance on God

- we must also approach his throne with a sense of awe
- the angels worshipped with fervent zeal
- they called to one another of the infinite perfection of God
- he is the LORD Almighty (the LORD of hosts), the one above legions of angels
- glorious in his holiness
- the angels, lacking adequate words, repeat the same ones over again
- three might suggest the superlative, that is God is not simply, holy
- or even holy, holy, but holy, holy, holy
- three might suggest completeness – which is the nature of God
- or even the Trinity – but the one unmistakable thing is that he is holy

If you want a lively debate in the contemporary Christian church

- you need look no further for a subject than that of worship
- people will soon fall out about style of songs, and music accompaniment
- but much of this is simply a matter of personal preference
- the real issue is this – does the worship reflect the holiness and glory of God?
- The angels delight in the worship of God and in the holiness of his presence
- Such worship is not casual or trivial, for the doorposts and the thresholds shake
- And the temple is filled with smoke, as with the cloud of the glory of God
- God is by definition 'holy' and God's holiness makes an abiding impression on Isaiah

God, is a sovereign God, and yet he is not remote but is known in the temple and the world

- God is knowable, he makes himself known, supremely in Jesus
- Who is, as Charles Wesley puts it, the Godhead seen 'veiled in flesh'
- He is a God who is knowable, seeable, hearable – a God who communicates

II A GOD WHO CONVICTS

Bishop J C Ryle was the first Anglican Bishop of Liverpool, who asked this question

- Suppose for a moment that you were allowed to enter heaven without holiness
- What would you do? What possible enjoyment could you feel there?
- To which of all the saints would you join yourself and by whose side would you sit?

This is just the problem that faced Isaiah

- The more he is drawn into the presence of God the more he feels unworthy
- The holiness of God convicts the sinner of sinfulness
- Yet this does not often seem to me to be a characteristic of much worship
- In the heavenly worship here, Isaiah, even as observer, felt convicted
- He felt unworthy and cried out in desperation:

“Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.”

(Isaiah 6:5)

There is no point trying to avoid the conclusion that in the presence of God

- There is conviction of sin
- We have lost the awesomeness and purity of God
- Though we would not want to underestimate the friendship of God in Jesus
- Neither must we underestimate the glory of God in Jesus
- The prophet would love to join in the praise but dare not
- For he feels that his lips are inadequate to sing the praises of God
- For his is a sinner and lives among people who are sinners
- And the way most of us sin most readily is through the tongue
- As someone said to me some years ago in Scotland
- We don't have murders in our church – we just have character assassination
- We don't have gossip in our church – we just have items for prayer
- Isaiah feels unable to speak in the assembly
- It is astonishing to him that he has been allowed to see the King, God Almighty
- And yet live
- In order to be an effective channel for God's penetrating word
- The power of the word needs to be felt in that person's own conscience
- The primary reference may be to the defiled lips of the worshipper
- But the prophet's commission will be to declare the holiness and glory of God
- Holy lips are not simply those that do not speak evil
- But those who speak a word of grace and truth
- For the prophet to remain silent and not reprove sin with boldness and liberty
- Is a great failing – but again the initiative is with God

III A GOD WHO CLEANSSES

Isaiah is in a bay way – he thinks he is going to die, because the presence of God is awesome

- I must admit from time to time I have been in services where I thought I was dying
- But this is not that kind of experience
- This is because of the awesomeness, the holiness and the glory of God
- As we go out through those glass doors Sunday by Sunday
- We might have manifold comments about the hymns, the songs, the preacher
- And whether we loved the hymns, loved the songs, loved the preacher
- Or hated the hymns, hated the songs and hated the preacher
- If that is all we have thought about then we will not have worshipped
- But if we are thinking about the awesomeness, the holiness and the glory of God
- Then and only then will we have worshipped
- And it is likely that we shall, in the presence of the Almighty
- Bowed our heads, under the overwhelming conviction of sin and unworthiness
- But just as we were crying out in desperation – God meets our need

A seraph performs the purging rite that gives the prophet his liberty to speak

- It was just when Isaiah was mourning over his sin that God blessed him
- Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted
- Those who humble themselves, those who are desperate – are the ones God meets
- The God of burning holiness himself provides this cleansing from the sacrificial altar
- A Christian cannot fail to recognise that the ultimate sacrificial altar is the cross
- Was it not the Holy Spirit who came as the mighty rushing wind
- And the tongues of fire upon the Apostles at Pentecost
- Some people are ready to speak about Pentecost as blessing – they are not wrong
- But let us not miss that the fire of Pentecost is supremely the fire of holiness

Sinful human being can join in the worship of the burning ones (the seraphim)

- When purified by the fire of God
- It is holiness expressed in sacrifice that burns away sin (33:13-16)

I A GOD WHO COMMUNICATES

II A GOD WHO CONVICTS

III A GOD WHO CLEANSSES

IV A GOD WHO COMMISSIONS

The passage we are considering is rightly titled in the NIV ‘Isaiah’s Commission’

- God is not calling Isaiah to come but sending him to go
- ‘Send’ is not used in the Bible of call but always of a particular task and message
- The importance of the particular task and message should not be missed
- It is not enough just to know that God is calling
- We need to get from the vague to the particular
- In chapters 1-5 God has already fixed his course of action
- Now in chapter 6 he needs to commission someone to go with the message
- Isaiah is equipped to go because God has communicated – his holiness and glory

The commission of God calls for faithfulness and obedience but it does not guarantee success

- God could have sent an angel who would have been above the message
- Instead he chose to send a man, Isaiah, who shared fully in that message
- None are allowed to go except those whom God appoints

There is a lesson for us all here

- In the life of the church we have sometimes appointed people to do things
- Who have not shared with us in the worshipping life of the church
- Because if we did not appoint those who did not share with us
- Then the work of the church would not continue
- But we must ask the question, is this work the work of the church or the work of God?
- The very basis of Isaiah's commission is his encounter with the living God in worship

The discussion that God seems to be having: 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?'

- Shows that was probably not the most attractive commission
- But Isaiah has been in the holy presence of God
- He has seen even the shining seraphim do his will, how can he do any less?
- He who once had been full of doubts and fears and thought he was about to die
- Now has an assurance of forgiveness and cleansing for his sins
- He is not pressed into service – he is a ready volunteer
- He is ready to encounter the greatest difficulties

It is worth noting that as evangelists to bring the nations to repentance

- These prophets were remarkably unsuccessful
- Generally the people would turn a deaf ear, or a blind eye to the message
- That is a hard lesson to learn
- Isaiah had been in the holy presence of God, he had been cleansed and commissioned
- And yet that was no guarantee of any kind of success

The words of God to Isaiah are quoted in each of the Gospels and twice by Paul (Matt 13:14-15; Mark 4:10-12; Luke 8:10; John 12:39-41, Acts 28:26-27; Rom 11:8)

- The set out the mystery as to why people do not respond to the good news
- The Parable of the Sower which Jesus links with this passage
- Anticipates that many people will fail to make a proper response to the words
- We should not assume that the prophets found the message of judgment easy
- Nevertheless these are still words of hope
- For as great as the coming devastation would be, it would only be for a time
- God has a continuing purpose for the remnant of his people
- Interestingly enough the remnant of the people are called a 'holy seed'

In his vision of the heavenly worship in the temple, Isaiah learns of God, who is:

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- II A GOD WHO CONVICTS
- III A GOD WHO CLEANSSES
- IV A GOD WHO COMMISSIONS