

THERFIELD CHAPEL
Sunday 15th May 2005 6:30

Isaiah 6

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. [2] Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. [3] And they were calling to one another:

*"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty;
the whole earth is full of his glory."*

[4] At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

[5] "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."

[6] Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. [7] With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."

*[8] Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?"
And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"*

[9] He said, "Go and tell this people:

*" 'Be ever hearing, but never understanding;
be ever seeing, but never perceiving.'*

*[10] Make the heart of this people calloused;
make their ears dull
and close their eyes.*

*Otherwise they might see with their eyes,
hear with their ears,
understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed."*

*[11] Then I said, "For how long, O Lord?"
And he answered:*

*"Until the cities lie ruined
and without inhabitant,
until the houses are left deserted
and the fields ruined and ravaged,
[12] until the Lord has sent everyone far away
and the land is utterly forsaken.*

[13] And though a tenth remains in the land,

*it will again be laid waste.
But as the terebinth and oak
leave stumps when they are cut down,
so the holy seed will be the stump in the land."*

You're sitting at home watching TV and you happen to glance out of the window. To your absolute horror, you see that the house across the road is on fire. Your mouth opens in a split-second of disbelief. You can see smoke pouring out of the downstairs windows and the faces of two terrified children in an upstairs bedroom window. Your heart stops beating as the full impact of the potential disaster hits you. You realise that every second counts and you grab the telephone and watch your fingers dialling 999.

A voice answers: Emergency. Which service do you require?

You try to say the word "Fire" but your mouth has gone dry. You clear your throat and shout the word "Fire!"

The operator says "one moment please" and then there's a one-second pause that seems like an eternity. You can hear your heart thumping in your chest and your head feels like it's going to explode. You look back out of the window: the smoke is getting worse and you can see the children distressed and banging on the bedroom window.

"Fire service" says a voice on the phone. You are shaking with horror; you take a deep breath and say:

[relaxed voice] "Oh hello. Sorry to trouble you. my name's John. I was just sitting in my living room watching Countdown - you know - that game show with Richard Whitely and Carol Vorderman. Well I don't normally watch daytime TV of course, and that Richard Whitely is a bit of a pompous twit - but that Carol Vorderman is quite fit and she's brilliant with mental arithmetic. Anyway, one of the contestants had just made up an 8-letter word from five consonants and four vowels .. shame he wasn't able to use the letter X, but it was still a good score. Anyway, the guys with the dictionary couldn't do any better and Richard Whitely was making some stupid comment, so I glanced out of the window and noticed that the house opposite me is on fire. Such a shame because they've just had the guttering replaced and done wonders with the garden. Anyhow, there's some people inside who don't look too happy - so I thought I'd report it."

OK - right. It doesn't happen like that, of course. In reality, when we get through to the Fire Service, we'd quickly and clearly give them the essential details of the problem: the address and location of the fire, and a quick description of the situation, so that the fire crew could be despatched as quickly as possible so that the fire can be tackled as soon as possible. Only afterwards would we draw breath and start telling the story of what happened that day.

And this is a bit similar to the situation we find Isaiah in. He'd had this fantastic and life-changing encounter with the Lord in the temple ... been confronted with the full glory of God and been called to be a prophet to speak the words of God to a sinful nation and world. Almost without drawing breath, Isaiah then, as it were, blurts out the essential gist of God's message to the Jews and the nations. And that was chapters 1 to 5.

Only after Isaiah had delivered this first tirade of judgment and prophecy did he, as it were, draw breath, sit back and provide us with the background to how all this started. So chapter six is, in a

sense, the introduction to the book of Isaiah and would normally have gone at the start of the book if it weren't for the fact that the essential message of God was so important and urgent that Isaiah needed to get it off his chest straight away.

So, as Isaiah now pauses for breath and reflects on how his ministry of prophecy started, so can we. So nothing too heavy tonight! And chapter six is a fascinating account of this man's encounter with God and the seraphim in the temple. It's a passage that has fascinated me since childhood - largely because of the appearance of these wonderful creatures with six wings, but also because of those words that Isaiah uses in verse eight: "Here am I, send me" ... words which we would all like to think that we would use each and every time God calls us to serve him in some particular way.

We know precious little about Isaiah himself. His calling to be a prophet was in the year of King Uzziah's death - about 739BC. Up until that time, there is no mention of Isaiah himself. There are many references to him in the second book of Kings, where he is acknowledged as a prophet and where he was consulted by kings and rulers. The second book of Chronicles acknowledges Isaiah as having given a full account of life in Judah during the reigns of King Uzziah and King Hezekiah.

So we know little of his background. He might have been a priest, although there's no mention in scripture that he came from a priestly family. He might have been one of the few godly men - part of the small faithful remnant of believers - that had not forsaken the worship of God in those secular and ungodly times. He might just have been a curious visitor to the temple - a sight-seer. We are simply not told.

I have a suspicion that he was, in fact, a godly man even before this encounter. The reference to the fact that these events took place in the temple is very matter-of-fact .. almost implying that it was quite common for Isaiah to be in the temple. But more than that is Isaiah's immediate reaction to being confronted with the vision of Almighty God .. what does he do? The first thing he does is confesses his own failings and sinfulness. And I think that is the sign of a godly person. Anyone else might have started analysing and questioning what was going on. But a believer confronted with the Holy God of Israel has no choice but to immediately recognise and confess his own unworthiness.

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple.

What, or who, was it exactly that Isaiah saw? The Lord, the King, the Lord Almighty .. these are the words that Isaiah uses. Did he mean that he saw the full glory of God the Father? I'm not sure. When Moses asked to see God's full glory back in Exodus 33, God refused to allow it and said: "*you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.*"

And if we look ahead to John's gospel, the apostle John quotes from Isaiah and adds this: [John 12:41] *Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him.*

So I'm given to think that who Isaiah actually saw in the temple was Jesus. There are a few instances in the OT of Jesus appearing even before his incarnation. Daniel, for example, talks of the appearance of a "Son of Man" with "The Ancient of Days". And here we do well to remember that Jesus, the Christ, has always existed with God the Father .. so we shouldn't be too surprised that he can make appearances before his earthly birth as a man.

Just as an interesting aside: if I'm right and it was Jesus who Isaiah saw, then it throws an interesting light on another event from the gospels. Remember in Luke chapter four, Jesus goes into the synagogue in Nazareth and stands up to read. The scroll that was given to him was a portion of the book of Isaiah - a portion that prophesied about Jesus himself. So, in reading it, Jesus wasn't actually quoting Isaiah, he was actually quoting himself from the prophecy which he himself gave to Isaiah some 750 years beforehand!

But that's an aside. Isaiah is in the temple and sees the Lord on a throne, high and lifted up. The train of his robe, we're told, filled the temple an expression of the overwhelming nature of this vision. How would you or I react? It must have been like thousands of powerful arc lamps being switched on in dazzling brightness! Scary, overwhelming, awesome, overpowering, life-changing, terrifying, supernatural, heart-stopping

In temple tradition, it was said that God's glory could be seen between the two figures of the cherubim at each end of the cover over the Ark of the Covenant. In other words, God was actually quite small! But now, in Isaiah's vision, God was far bigger than that: not just confined to the small space between the figures of the cherubim, but filling the temple and seated on a throne high up . Almost 150 years later Ezekiel had a similar experience. He envisioned God being borne along on a great chariot throne by living creatures - cherubim.

What a fantastic experience it must have been. I wonder if any of you have experienced anything like that? I believe I have - not long after I had become a Christian. I remember being with quite a large gathering of Christians and we had been praying and singing and worshipping. There came a point where I felt my head being lifted up, and although I had my eyes closed, I felt an intense warmth and light on my face. I felt that I had been lifted up off the ground so that I could see into heaven and I was tingling all over. I didn't see anything except light and warmth but I felt very very happy and filled with love and acceptance ... it was almost as if God was saying "Welcome to the Kingdom: you have made the right choice - here's just a glimpse of the glory that will be your eternal home."

I wouldn't want to be definite about what was going on there. It was a very personal moment and I wouldn't want to base any theology on it at all. Maybe it was just one of those moments when God did something very special just for me purely out of love. Something for me to remember and be glad about. Something to remind me about the commitment I made to him and the promises he has made to me and to all of us. I don't know - but I'm glad it happened and would be thrilled to know if anyone else has had anything similar.

At least it helps me to imagine, to a small extent, the sense of awe that must have hit Isaiah.

Then come the seraphim. [2] *Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying.* [3] *And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory."*

What do we make of them? In Jewish and Christian tradition there are nine Orders of Angels: Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones, Dominions, Virtues, Powers, Principalities, Archangels, and Angels. The study of angelic beings touches on a world into which we have very little insight but which could, if we let it, run riot with our imaginations. Evangelicals tend to shy away from speculating too much about the nature of created beings other than fellow humans. Mystics, perhaps, tend to

dwell too much on the hierarchy of angelic beings in heavenly places. Somewhere in the middle lies the truth. Angels and the like are mentioned so frequently both in the OT and the NT that we shouldn't dismiss them as myths. One of the most fascinating books I ever read about angels was by the American evangelist Billy Graham. I don't know if it's still in print but if you get chance to read it, do - it's very thought provoking ... it's called *Angels*.

Angels of various kinds were certainly of great interest to the church of the middle ages. Many of our parish churches are named after, or dedicated to, angels. The Victorians too were fascinated by them .. many stained glass windows depict angels.

For us, it's probably sufficient to know that there are other beings around - not just us humans. Scripture talks about thousands of angelic beings, doing the work of God both in heaven and here on earth. Isaiah's description of the seraphim as having wings and feet and hands tells me that these beings were designed - or rather created - to exist primarily in a physical world ... wings imply both an atmosphere and gravity: feet imply a hard physical surface on which to walk. It's fascinating to ponder if these seraphim are still active on earth and just what exactly they do!

Like all creatures of God - ourselves included - their first priority is to give glory to God and proclaim his holiness. So *Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.*" is what they shouted to each other.

If Isaiah had any doubt about the identity of the figure on the throne by that stage, those doubts would have been dispelled by the proclamation of the seraphim. We're not told how many of the seraphim were present that day in the temple - but the noise of their voices was enough to shake the doorposts and thresholds of the temple. And the temple was filled with smoke. This is very reminiscent of when Moses met with God on Mount Sinai back in Exodus 19:18 *Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently.*

Isaiah was terrified! *Woe to me!" he 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."*

I suspect that Isaiah thought he was going to die. Realising that he had seen God, and remembering what God had told Moses when Moses wanted to see God's face .. there wasn't much alternative in Isaiah's thinking. Not only had he seen the Lord, but he realised that his own sinfulness made him unworthy to remain alive in the Lord's presence. But maybe it was this realisation that kept him alive! He cries out: *I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips.* Unclean lips, of course, has nothing to do with eating a messy chocolate ice-cream. Isaiah was saying that he was a back-slidden and unrighteous person who spoke and acted in an ungodly way and that he lived in a largely godless and unrighteous society who had turned their backs on the covenant given to Moses and the people by God. Doesn't that strike you as a confession?

And here we can pride ourselves on knowing God a bit better than Isaiah did. 1 John 1:9 *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*

Something that might have come as a surprise to Isaiah! And an even greater surprise when one of these alien creatures - the seraphim - takes a red-hot coal from the altar and touches Isaiah's lips with it! *See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.*

The hot coal a symbol of cleansing, of burning away the unrighteousness .. maybe a forerunner of baptism.

Then we come to verse 8 - the purple passage of this chapter I suppose:

[8] Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us? And I said, "Well that's a good question Lord. I'm a bit new to all this and don't think I have the confidence to do what you want. I do know a couple of people who we could ask - but they are very busy and already do a lot for the temple - plus they have a young family and demanding jobs. Maybe I could ask around and get a few people together to discuss it. Meanwhile, maybe you could jot down a list of the specific things you want doing and we could meet up again next week and go through it?"

Oooooops - sorry - I think I misread that: must be force of habit. Let me try again: *And Isaiah said, "Here am I. Send me!"*

Isaiah's willingness to do whatever God wanted was unconditional. He didn't stop to see if anyone else volunteered, and he didn't even ask what it was that God wanted him to do. Here am I, send me!

In an ideal world, I'm sure we'd all like to think that we were as quick and willing to serve God as Isaiah was. But we know only too well that we often don't respond that way. Now, the last thing I want to do is to invoke a massive guilt trip and make us all feel bad because we don't always respond as Isaiah did.

Neither do I want to give the impression that Isaiah was such a special case, and that his revelation of God was so unique, that we're not really expected to follow his example.

To be called to be a Christian is to be called into a life of serving and obeying our Lord. Sometimes I hesitate to emphasise this because I'm aware that it can put people off. Someone who has not yet made the decision to accept Jesus as Saviour and Lord may well be attracted to a God who will provide forgiveness, comfort and the promise of eternal life - but be totally worried that they're going to get sucked into something that they no longer have control over - and that they might be expected to rush straight out to Bongobongo-land to convert the cannibalistic natives to Christianity.

But I'd rather be truthful. If you read the gospels and look at all the times Jesus encountered someone and did something for them - like forgiveness, healing, rescue or whatever more often than not he then told them to do something, and often it was immediate.

The blind man was sent to tell his family.

The leper was told to go and make the thank offering

Peter was told to feed the flock

The adulteress was told to go and sin no more

The rich man was to "go and do thou likewise"

Paul was sent to take the gospel to the gentiles

The taxman was told to go and repay those whom he had cheated.

The list is almost endless.

More often than not, when we become Christians, we are given something to do for the kingdom of God. If I withheld that information from you, I'd be preaching a watered-down gospel.

But I don't want to frighten you either.

In Luke 10 we have an account of when Jesus appointed some 70 odd followers to go out into the surrounding towns in pairs and, essentially, to do some street evangelism and door-to-door ministry. There is no account of how they felt about this, but I guess their reaction would be similar to ours ... worry, reluctance, nervousness, hesitation, stubbornness, terror and that awful feeling of "what HAVE I got myself into!"

One of the nicest and most comforting bits of that episode is the fact that Jesus sent them out in pairs. They were not on their own. The human need to have someone else to share the burden is fully catered for. And that is true of our church too. The nature of a fellowship of believers is that work is shared and that we support and encourage one another, we complement each others' gifts, we are sometimes a shoulder to cry on and sometimes we're the one doing the crying.

So if you find it hard to relate to Isaiah's experience, then take heart from the experience of the 70 disciples that Jesus sent out in pairs. They had all the fears and misgivings that we have - and yet they went!

And how did it work out? Luke 10:17 *The seventy-two returned with **joy** and said, "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name."*

Joy! I repeat the word, joy! They didn't come back saying "thank heavens that's over" or "I'm never doing that again": they came back with **joy**!

And isn't joy something that we're all after? Isn't that the missing link in our Christian experience? Yes, we've given our hearts to the Lord, we come along to church, we get something out of the service and maybe we're even living better lives than we did before, but where is the joy? Where is that inner feeling of assurance that our salvation is real?

Could it be that we don't experience that joy because we haven't attempted yet to serve the Lord in some way?

I doubt if there's anyone here tonight who hasn't had some persistent prompting from the Holy Spirit to do something for God. I'm not going to begin suggesting what that thing could be, because I don't want to limit the endless varieties of ways in which we can all serve God. I think you will knowand if you honestly don't - then I'm sure the elders and deacons will suggest something!

But maybe now is the time to commit to making a start on following that prompting and to start attempting things for God. Maybe one way is to chat with someone who is already doing some piece of Christian service and simply offer to help. Remember Jesus sent the disciples out in pairs? Forget the feelings of "Oh I'm not ready yet, I'm too inexperienced, I'm frightened of making a fool of myself." **JUST DO IT.**

Jesus is not going to leave you isolated, he's not going to set traps to make you look silly. He's not going to kidnap you and send you off to Bongobongo-land. He is going to empower and encourage you. That's his promise.

And I am convinced that joy will follow - just as it did with the seventy. Assurance of your faith and salvation will come. You will find Jesus more real to you than ever. You will start to feel more part of his church, you will grow as a Christian, you will be an encouragement to yourself and others.

Listen to the voice of the spirit. What is it that you are being prompted to do? What is your response going to be?

If the words of Isaiah - "*Here am I, send me*" sound a bit too grand for you, then how about trying the words "*Would you like some help with that?*"

They amount to the same thing: a willingness to do something for the God who has done so much for us in the Lord Jesus Christ.

I'm aware that there's still half a chapter to go: all that stuff about always listening but never hearing, always looking but never seeing. As far as I'm concerned for tonight, that all amounts to one warning to Israel and to us. And the warning is this: It's all too easy for God's words to go in one ear and out of the other ... and it's a warning that is well placed in view of what I've said tonight. So I don't intend to look in greater detail at that second half of the chapter.

So don't let God's word go in one ear and out of the other. As we sing our final hymn and then start chatting about work and the weather over tea and coffee - don't let that inner prompting to Christian service get drowned out. Make a commitment to do something about it. *Here am I, send me* or *Can I give you a hand with that?* Either of those will bring joy to God and to each of us.

The End.

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