

Isaiah 6 Sermon  
Church on the Corner

1 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. 2 Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. 3 And one called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.'

4 The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. 5 And I said: '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!'

6 Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. 7 The seraph[b] touched my mouth with it and said: 'Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.' 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 And he said, 'Go and say to this people: "Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand."

10 Make the mind of this people dull,

and stop their ears,

and shut their eyes,

so that they may not look with their eyes,

and listen with their ears,

and comprehend with their minds,

and turn and be healed.'

11 Then I said, 'How long, O Lord?' And he said:

'Until cities lie waste

without inhabitant,

and houses without people,

and the land is utterly desolate;

12 until the Lord sends everyone far away,

and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land.

13 Even if a tenth part remains in it,

it will be burned again,

like a terebinth or an oak

whose stump remains standing

when it is felled.'[c]

The holy seed is its stump.

*"While you live in mortal splendour the price you pay for you your comfort is a collapsed view of heaven - the loss of the ability to see pictures in your head of an afterlife"*

Douglas Coupland - Polaroids from the dead.

And this is a story of a nation, living in comfort who turn a blind eye to the needs of the poor and the outsider, and lost not just their vision of heaven but of God

It is a majestic and hugely important passage of Scripture which sets the scene for the whole of Isaiah's ministry and also for the ministry of Jesus himself.

### Context

the passage begins *"In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple."*

Uzziah was king of Israel in 8th Century BC, he could have been one of the greats. He became king when he was just 16 and became a great military commander, defeating the Philistines and pushing back the enemies of Israel. He developed their military and economic power and in their international standing. And interestingly he was also a technological innovator. We learn about him briefly in the *Chronicles of the Kings*.

*2 Chronicles 26:15 In Jerusalem he set up machines, invented by skilled workers, on the towers and the corners for shooting arrows and large stones. And his fame spread far, for he was marvellously helped until he became strong.*

*16 But when he had become strong he grew proud, to his destruction. For he was false to the Lord his God, and entered the temple of the Lord to make offering on the altar of incense."*

Israel became over confident in their King, in their military and economic power and in their international treaties and like Uzziah - when they became strong they grew proud and careless. It is into that context that Isaiah is called to restore that vision.

### A vision of the Divine King.

*v1 In the year that King Uzziah died, Now that could simply be a reference to that date - it isn't that long since we measured eras by the lives and deaths of monarchs. Circa 740bc*

But this statement has a much more poignant meaning than that.

It is the end of an age. A golden age of prosperity and comfort and influence. The King is dead.

**And in that year Isaiah sees not just God but v5 "I have seen the king".**

Not Uzziah but God.

### Isaiah realises that it is God who is in control.

*v1 I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty*

A throne is a symbol of authority. That throne is High and lofty - above all the other thrones on earth. It is not the king, or any other authority who is in charge. It is God. We struggle with this, we long to feel like we are in control. Few things are more humbling - in the right sense than that. And what that means is that you are not in control and the sooner you realise that the happier you will be.

### And the whole earth is full of his glory.

One of the great errors of ancient Israel was their co-opting of God as their own national possession. Because he had shown them favour in the past, he must be theirs - they owned him.

He is the God of the whole of creation - the God of the whole of creation.

*"And the hem of his robe filled the temple"* Picture medieval king - or game of thrones. King on a throne resplendent in a crown and a great velvet robe trimmed with ermine. Creation displays the glory of God and the temple is just the hem of his robe.

A picture from another era. The Temple was a vast building, but in Isaiahs vision the hem of Gods robe fills it.

### And God is Holy.

And around that throne are Seraphs and they say *'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.'*

In Hebrew the way you emphasise a word is by repeating it. The word becomes its own modifier. So something that was very beautiful would be beautifully beautiful, powerfully powerful.

God is not simply Holy. His is not simply Holy. He is holy, holy, holy.

**What does Holy mean?** Otherness, sacred, heavenly - the presence of God. Imagine a holy place - a great cathedral or the western wall in Jerusalem.

## But it is more than that and Isaiah's response to this vision a clue.

*v5 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!*

Isaiah's understanding of holiness is that God's holiness is complete otherness from all of the sinfulness, corruption and brokenness of humanity. And whatever Isaiah thought of himself beforehand - whatever self righteousness was there - on encountering the holiness of God he realises he is ruined. He realises that he cannot stand in the presence of this holy God.

And it seems that his understanding of the situation is absolutely correct.

## But what happens next is that God intervenes.

*v7 The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: 'Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.'*

Many people have wrestled with what this means. The alter symbolises the provision of God for sin, which lies at the heart of Israel's relationship with God. There sin is atoned for - but it is an alter which points towards the cross of Christ.

But what is significant here is that it is not anything that Isaiah does which deals with his sin, but is God's gracious intervention. It is the action of God that means that our sin is blotted out and our guilt departed.

## Just hear this. "your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out"

That is it. God intervenes and it is done. We need to hear this because just like Isaiah God has intervened for us.

And how long does it take? A few days of feeling guilty to make up for what you have done wrong? No. It is finished.

## So what is it that sets Isaiah apart from his people?

*v4 I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.*

It reminds me of the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector who says "God have mercy on me a sinner" and who goes home right with God.

What sets you apart. It is not that you are better than other people it is not your morality or your doctrine but your recognition of your own sinfulness. And that awareness brings down the mercy of God upon you.

## And immediately he is called by God.

*v8 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!'*

There is no hesitation. Once confronted by the reality of God he has no hesitation in responding to the call.

## And what is that call?

It is an hard job.

*v9 Go and say to this people: "Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand." 10 Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed.'*

**If that sounds familiar - it should.** Jesus quotes it directly when he is explaining why he speaks in parables. Jesus sees his own ministry in these terms.

Isaiah's job is to lay before these people a vision of God. But needs to be very aware that the consequence of this may well be them hardening their hearts.

It is a very strange part of the human condition - it may be the closest we get to an experience of the original sin of humanity. The heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart. And there is this inane desire in us to reject God and to be like God ourselves. To be in control, and for life to be about our glory instead. "My kingdom come, my will be done".

## If Israel will not be a light to the nations, it will become a very different sign.

This nation, for so long the beneficiaries of the grace of God, now displays before the world another very important truth. And that is that God is a God of justice. He will not ignore oppression, greed and exploitation forever. The arrogant and the proud, who exploit the poor and the outsider, to gather up corrupt wealth for the few while treating the most vulnerable with contempt. What will echo down through the centuries is the story of God's judgement on a nation to act as a warning.

## But isn't it fascinating that the possibility of God's mercy is always there.

And that mercy is always in danger of changing the story.

*10 so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed.'*

If they were to turn back to God he would respond to them and he would heal them, he could not fail to do that. For he is always a God of love and of mercy.

## And finally - even in the midst of Judgment there is hope.

*v13 like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump.*

In the midst of all this talk of judgement there is the promise of new creation and a promise of a messiah. The stump of Jesse remains in the ground and one day a shoot shall come forth from it... but that is a story for another day.

## Conclusion.

Reclaim your vision of God and beware of the dangers of comfort and the illusion of control. The sooner you learn to trust that it is God alone who is in control the happier you will be.

And remember what it is that sets Isaiah apart - not his knowledge or his righteousness. Not his morality or his religion. It is his acknowledgement of his own sinfulness that brought down the mercy of God. And that sin is dealt with by the intervention of God.

In Christ you are exactly the same, and so hear those words.

*"your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out"*

*"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."*

The Jesus Prayer