

A God Who is Holy

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Date: 22 November 1998

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on November the 22nd 1998.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled A God Who is Holy and is from Isaiah chapter 6 verses 1 to 13.

Almighty God, we pray that you will open our ears to hear, our eyes to see and our hearts to understand your word for Jesus' sake.

Amen. When the new BHP chairman was announced recently, there was a press conference and all the financial experts pondered whether this was the man who would usher in the new era of hope and growth and restored strength to BHP.

When a couple of months ago St Kilda announced its new coach, there was a press conference and all the football experts wondered whether Tim Watson was the man who would usher in the new age of hope and strength and glory and even perhaps give St Kilda a premiership after 32 years.

[1 : 18] When a church inducts a new minister, they don't call a press conference, they have a service and all the parishioners ponder whether this new minister is the person to usher in a new era of hope and growth and strength for that particular church.

When Tony Blair was elected Prime Minister in Britain a couple of years ago, there was widespread public acclaim and expectation that this was the man who would make Britain great and strong again and restore it and so on.

750 years BC, Israel had a great king, a king for nearly 50 years. He was a fine administrator, a great planner, he strengthened the defence forces, he expanded the territorial borders of Israel, he ushered in a new era of hope and growth and strength.

On him hung the hopes of the nation, the greatest king since Solomon, 170 or more years before. But in the year that he died, in the months leading up to his death, of about 740 BC, Isaiah the prophet saw in a vision another king.

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.

[3 : 06] A great vision, but a great contrast. The greatest king since Solomon, but the real king, God.

A great vision, but one that is a rebuke to the nation in a sense. Because it says that all the hopes that the nation has placed on King Uzziah, are in the end in vain.

He's about to die. Indeed, at the time of his death, he was dying in the shame of a leper, unclean, and the might of Assyria was rising in the north, becoming again a superpower.

You see, this vision is saying, firstly, that hope and trust placed in a human king, or a human football coach, or any human being, or human institution, for that matter, is hope that in the end is placed in vain.

No person, no political system, no institution can carry and bear the hopes of people like this. Only God can do that. And Isaiah's vision here rebukes the nation, in a sense, for its misplaced hope and expectation.

[4 : 20] It also rebukes their pride. In the preceding chapters, we see the pride of the people. They consider themselves to be high and lofty and lifted up and exalted. And Isaiah, in chapter 2 and chapter 5, threatened the people by saying that God would come to judge and all their pride would be brought down, but God himself would be exalted.

And now he sees a vision of an exalted God. And the implication is then a rebuke for the nation, for their misplaced pride and their misplaced trust in a human being.

In whom ought they trust? God, the King. God, the real King. The King of the universe, not just the King of Jerusalem or Judah.

This is the King whose glory fills the whole earth, verse 3 says. Not just even the temple, which people naturally expected. And this is a theme that runs through this book of Isaiah.

In whom do you place your trust? God is the only one in the end who is worth our trust. Not the great King Uzziah.

[5 : 31] No, sir, he's about to die. Not even his successor Ahaz, as we'll see next week. Don't place your trust in him, place it in God. Not even another great King to come in 40 years time, the great Hezekiah.

No. Place it in God, the real King. Not a human King. That's the first point of this sermon. God is the King.

So, place your trust in him and him alone. But secondly, the vision of this kingly God is a vision of a holy God.

One of the things that's remarkable about Isaiah's description of this vision is how little he describes the God who is at the centre of the vision. He describes the context, the throne, the hem of the robe, the attendant seraphs who are flying around and the words that they speak.

But there's very little by way of description of God who can look after all on a holy God and yet live. Isaiah is appropriately reticent to describe the indescribable holiness of this God on whom human eyes ought not to see and fall.

[6 : 54] Isaiah is being taken in this vision where people dare not go into the holiest of holy places to the throne of God himself, the holy God.

Like Moses a few centuries before Isaiah who sees a vision of God, like Ezekiel who in a century or more will see another vision of God and like the Apostle John at the end of the Bible who sees a vision of God enthroned in splendour, there are no descriptions of what God himself looks like.

Descriptions of the things around about, descriptions of glory, but of God silence in effect. So holy is he that human eyes cannot really see nor describe what he's like.

Isaiah is being taken into the temple in this vision, to the holy temple in Jerusalem, to the holiest of holies, where he ought not to be. And there he sees what is there, the Ark of the Covenant, a box-like arrangement in which are the tablets of the Ten Commandments, two gold cherubim, angelic figures with their wings spread out on either side of the Ark.

The Ark is God's footstool, his throne is in between the cherubim above the Ark. And normally when the priest would go into the temple, there would be no God to see, there would be the throne, they would believe God's presence to be there, they wouldn't see God.

[8 : 31] But Isaiah is taken in this vision and he sees the Lord, God, on the throne. In between the gold cherubim, above the Ark of the Covenant, and now we're told in verse 2, there were seraphs, a strange angelic being hardly ever mentioned anywhere else in the Bible.

the word seraph relates to the word burning, so it's perhaps some fiery sort of being. Fire is often a symbol of God's presence in the Bible. And they were in attendance above God and they had six wings, but even these heavenly beings had to cover themselves before the holiness of God.

They couldn't just gape at God, wide-eyed, but their faces were covered by two wings, so holy is God. Their feet were covered by two wings, so holy is God.

Feet is sometimes a euphemism for the private parts, but it may just be that the feet are the normal thing that gets dirty when you walk in the ancient dusty world, and so they had to be covered as well, and with two wings they flew.

That's how holy God is, that even the angelic heavenly beings cover themselves in his presence. And their words indicate his holiness as well.

[9 : 45] Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. Not holy, holy, holy because of the Trinity of God the Father, Son and Spirit. Some people think that's what it's about, but it's a Hebrew idiom.

When they say holy, holy, holy, or big, big, big, it's saying the biggest. It's the way they say they're superlatives. The best, the biggest, in this case the holiest of things.

There is none holier than God, the holy God. So holy is he that in a sense he is the source of all holiness. That's what their words are about.

No wonder in the book of Isaiah, one of the common names that Isaiah gives God is the Holy One of Israel. Twenty-six times in his book, but only six times anywhere else in the Old Testament.

It is Isaiah's, if you like, characteristic way of describing God, because the holiness of God is fundamental to his words of prophecy. The idea of being holy is initially the idea of separation.

[10 : 49] Something is set apart for a particular purpose. That's holiness. This is the holy table here, not because the wood is special, but because the function of the table is special.

It's set apart for the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Holy is being set apart for God. But in the Old Testament that carries a moral connotation as well.

Because God is utterly perfect and moral and righteous, then holiness brings in that sense of morality and righteousness as well.

Purity, if you like, or cleanness about behaviour and actions and speech. That's unusual in ancient religions, but it's there in the Old Testament.

God's holiness, his set apartness, if you like, from the creation has a moral implication. Here then is a vision of a holy God.

[11 : 48] As the hymn writer says, pavilioned in splendour and girded with praise. A God beyond human description, too pure for human eyes to see.

Immortal, invisible God, only wise, in light, inaccessible hid from our eyes. O Lord, we would render, O help us to see. Tis only the light of thy splendour hides from thee.

That's the God of that hymn. The God so perfect that human eyes really cannot quite behold him. And yet, this is the God that we so often take for granted.

The God that we impure human beings just assume that we have a casual fellowship with. The God that we think somehow smiles grandfather-like or benevolently on our bumbings around on this world and on our failings.

This is a holy God. God, handle with care. In our day and age, we, the church, we Christians, and our world needs to recapture a vision of the holy God.

[13 : 10] Not a God to casually survey with unveiled eyes. Not a God to approach lightly or carelessly. Not a God who turns a blind eye on sin.

Not a God who is a pale reflection of what we are like. A holy God. A perfect God.

A God who, in whose presence there is awe and wonder. Fear and trembling. Handle this God with care.

That's why Isaiah's response is so appropriate in verse 5. He didn't jump up and down with joy. He didn't sort of walk up to God and say, oh God, it's great to see you.

I've been looking forward to meeting you. He didn't sort of have a little divine chat in the temple. He said, woe is me. Woe is me.

[14 : 14] For I'm lost. I'm a man of unclean lips. I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips. And yet my eyes have seen the King. The Lord of hosts.

Woe. Why woe? Because the holiness of God's perfect light exposes the darkness of his sin and evil in his life. Because sinners coming too close to a holy God run the risk of the fire of his fury, being fried up in the light of his holiness.

That's why Isaiah says, woe. Because any real encounter with God exposes our own inability, our own sinfulness, our own evil in our life.

And how much we need that in our world. Sometimes people think they've had a vision of God. Sometimes you read of people who've seen God.

But if there is no exposure of sinfulness in the light of the holy God, then beware of false imitations. Because whenever anybody encounters God in the Bible, their sin is exposed.

[15 : 28] Moses, Isaiah, Peter with Jesus, John's vision of heaven, and many, many others as well. That's why the place shortened.

It was filled with smoke in verse 4. Because when the holiness of God meets with a sinful world, it doesn't mix easily. It jars. It shakes.

Just see the earthquake and the blackness at Calvary when Christ was crucified. This holy God is, as both Old and New Testaments tell us, the God who is a consuming fire.

The extraordinary thing, though, is that not only is this God the King, not only is this God holy, but this God forgives.

One can imagine Isaiah's fear and terror as he sees verse 6 happen. One of the seraphs flew to me holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs.

[16 : 39] Too hot, it seems, even for a fiery seraph to hold in his hand. Can you imagine the terror that a man who's just said, woe because I'm unclean in the face of a holy God, now sees a live coal from God's altar being brought towards him by a fiery seraph?

Surely destruction is on the way. Surely Isaiah is about to be fried up in the fire of God's purity. But no. Surprise!

The seraph says in verse 7, now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out. We don't expect that.

It's inexplicable in the end. God forgives. The holy God forgives. It's not as though God is schizophrenic and for some time he acts as a holy God and then all of a sudden he flips into a compassionate forgiving mode.

No, not at all. His forgiveness stems from his very holiness. Your sin has been blotted out. Your guilt is gone. Isaiah is told.

[17 : 50] The coal is applied to his lips, the very place that he confessed his uncleanness. In verse 5, I am a man of unclean lips and the tongue comes to his lips. Maybe it's because he's a prophet and his words are all important.

Maybe though it's because the lips betray the heart. It's out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks. And his guilt is gone. Instantaneously, the verb suggests.

Like a click of the fingers. Not just his lips purified, but his whole being purified by this coal from God's altar of sacrifice. How can a holy God forgive like this?

How can a sinner stand in the presence of God forgiven? Because as the end of verse 7 says, your sin is blotted out, literally covered over or atoned for.

How can sin be atoned? If you read the billboard that's at the end of the freeway near Nicholson Street, it's through milk.

[18 : 58] There's a brand of milk. I can't remember what it's called. I've only seen this billboard once the other day. A tone for sin. Milk.

A lot of nonsense. Sin's not atoned for by milk. It's atoned for by blood. Wherever there is forgiveness of sins, it's through the blood of a sacrifice.

The idea of the word is to cover. Not in the sense of cover as to hide. That is, I will just put on some nice clothes and pretend on the inside you're okay.

But cover in the sense of paying a debt. You owe somebody money and you give them some money and you say, does that cover it? That is, does that pay off what I owe? Does that cover the cost of what I'm buying here?

That's the idea here. To cover for sin is to pay the debt. To pay what is due. Who pays? Not Isaiah. His wallet is never mentioned here.

[20 : 09] The call, in fact, comes from God's altar. The implication, though it's not stated explicitly, is that God himself pays for the atonement. We're not here told how, though the Bible goes on to tell us how.

How much did he pay? We're not told here either. It's not an easy thing, though, for God to atone for sin. In the Old Testament, it was the blood of animals. But in the end, that was just a foretaste of what really pays for sin.

What the New Testament tells us is the precious blood of Jesus Christ on the cross. Here, you see, is an anticipation of where the Bible's headed.

God himself pays the price, the price of his own son's life on the cross, so that we may have our sin blotted out and therefore stand in the presence of a holy God.

Isn't that extraordinary? But God just doesn't ignore sin. He doesn't turn a blind eye to it. Then he wouldn't be holy. He'd be immoral. But God, the holy God, deals justly and rightly with the sins of people by paying the price himself, even though we are the ones who ought to be paying the price, but can't.

[21 : 33] It's too big a price for us to pay. Isaiah is not unique here either. He is meant to be a model for Israel. When he confesses his own unclean lips, he acknowledges it in the context of the nation's unclean lips.

Indeed, amazingly, for five chapters, he's been castigating the nation for all their sins and now he says, I'm one of you. I'm a sinner. It's not himself righteously condemning the nation, but him as a sinner, condemning the sins of his sinful brothers and sisters.

But as Isaiah is forgiven through God's grace here, that is meant to be a challenge, rebuke, invitation to the nation who sees this and hears his words and reads them.

But another thing also about this holy, forgiving God, it is only when we have a vision of a holy God that our own sin and need for forgiveness is exposed.

Because in the light of this world, which is fairly dull, we do not see our own sin. We probably see our own righteousness in the light of this sinful world.

[22 : 48] But it's when we're in contrast to the holy God, when we see his perfection, then do we see our sin exposed. The light exposing the darkness of our souls.

Sin is only exposed by the holiness of God. It's a trend, I think, in Christian preaching to downplay God's holiness.

But that in the end only serves to cover up our need for forgiveness, cover up the need for the gospel and therefore cover up the need for Jesus' death. Whenever we downplay God's holiness, we pervert and destroy the gospel itself.

The holiness of God and his forgiveness of sinners go hand in hand here and throughout the Bible. So God is king, God is holy, God is forgiving, but God is also the judge.

Isaiah, forgiven, is eager to serve God. He volunteers for ministry in verse 8. Whom shall I send, God says, and who will go for me? And Isaiah says, Here am I, send me, the forgiven sinner, eager to serve in gratitude to a forgiving God.

[24 : 05] An example surely for us as well. Isaiah 6 is a passage that's often used at ordination services. It was for mine a few years ago.

But it always stops at verse 8 in the ordination service. Verses 9 and 10 are so unexpected. He's told that this is his message.

To say to the people, Keep listening but do not comprehend. Keep looking but do not understand. 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.

What a ministry to be given. No wonder it's taken out of the Anglican ordination service. Who would want a job description that predicts failure? Who would want to go and preach to the people to tell them to, in effect, get them away from God?

If I sent the people away from God, the bishop wouldn't be happy, the wardens wouldn't be happy, the treasurer would be up in arms because the bills wouldn't be paid and I doubt that I'd have much future in our church.

[25 : 17] And yet Isaiah is not unique in this. He's not being told to preach such a complicated, academic, convoluted, obscure message that nobody could hope to understand it so they all just drift off away from God.

He's being told to preach the simple truths of God. Simple, straightforward gospel. But the point is that not everybody responds with faith and repentance to the gospel when it's preached.

The gospel is the greatest news of all. But the trouble is that the gospel exposes our sinfulness. And not everybody likes that. If anybody does.

And so people reject it. Men love darkness more than light. Jesus said. And what Isaiah's ministry was like was also the same with Jesus and the same with all of God's faithful preachers and prophets it seems.

They preach and the result is that people who already have hard hearts find their hearts being hardened further as they keep on ignoring, turning deaf ears to the gospel of God's grace and glory.

[26 : 27] One of the saddest things I think in Christian ministry, one of the hardest things I think for ministers to cope with is people rejecting the gospel and it happens time and time again.

They hear the good news but they refuse to respond with faith and repentance and continue living without God. And one of the great temptations that very often is fallen into by ministers who preach is to change the gospel.

Let's make it easier. Let's make it softer. Let's make it easier to accept. Let's take away the holiness bit. So therefore we take away our exposure of our own sin.

Let's make it all nice and loving and no judgement at all. Then, maybe then, everybody will respond with faith and repentance but what is there to repent of when that is the case?

Perverted truth never heals. Perverted truth never brings eternal salvation. Only the gospel does that in all its fullness. Any watered down attempt to preach the gospel is not the gospel and does not bring salvation at all.

[27 : 42] What this is saying, I guess, it's helpful for me to remember as well is that the successful Christian ministry is not about numbers of converts.

It's about faithfulness in preaching. Because church history for the last 2,000 years has been full of faithful ministers of the gospel who preach God's truth simply, straightforwardly, appealingly but with little fruit.

One of my heroes is a man called Charles Simeon. He was the vicar of Holy Trinity Cambridge in the late 18th and early 19th centuries for 54 years.

Take note. For the first 10 of those years the church wardens locked him out of the pulpit.

He preached anyway and for 10 years with little response. But after 10 years those who rejected the gospel in and out week by week in the end gave up and left.

[28 : 54] And after 54 years his ministry was so profound that it is still being felt in the Anglican church worldwide today.

I believe the most influential Anglican probably ever. Certainly since the Reformation. But the point is that his success is not in the end the numbers of converts.

His success is faithfulness in preaching the gospel. Preaching God's truth despite the response of rejection. And there are people all over the world missionaries, church leaders, pastors, lay pastors and so on whose ministry will be assessed by God not by its success in numbers but by the faithfulness of its preaching the gospel.

That's certainly how St Paul understood it in Acts 20 when he said to the Ephesian elders I have been faithful in preaching the gospel and that's what counts. Not the fact that there are successful churches about.

It is not easy being a preacher of God's gospel. We might expect people to flock in response but it doesn't happen very often. Isaiah's society was complacent, wealthy, smug, affluent, self-sufficient and his response was minimal.

[30 : 17] And the same things that characterise his society it seems to me characterise our own. Complacent, smug, wealthy, self-sufficient, no need for God really. No wonder we get such little response in the preaching of the gospel in our country.

It's not the problem of the preaching of the gospel, it's the problem of the hard hearts. But let us resist the temptation to change the gospel because that only ever brings destruction to all.

The destruction that Isaiah's nation faced is described in verses 11 and 12. It's severe. Cities will lie waste without inhabitants. The houses will be without people.

The land will be desolate. Everybody will be sent away into exile. This certainly happened 150 years later when the Babylonians came. Even if a tenth part remain in it, it will be burned again.

There won't be any left, he's saying. It will be absolute and total devastation. But judgment is never God's final word. The last six verses of this chapter that seem to sit so strangely here provide a slender shoot of hope.

[31 : 30] The holy seed is its stump. When a bushfire rages through an area, it looks as though nothing is left and nothing can live in the charred remains of the fire.

But we know very well that that's not the case. We know that within days or weeks we'll see a new shoot of life in a burnt out gum tree. We'll see a banksia begin to sprout forth life because its seed pod has been burnt open and therefore life can begin again.

That's what's being said here. Through all the total devastation, there'll be a little shoot of life. The holy seed is its stump. It looks dead but life will spring from this stump.

And we're told in a few chapters in Isaiah, we'll see in three weeks' time, that this stump is one person, a descendant of David, a royal king who will come in the future.

And we know that 750 years after these words were spoken, that seed germinated in Bethlehem in a manger when Jesus, the son of David, was born.

[32 : 43] The Bible ends with another vision of holy God. But a vision different to Isaiah is because it is a vision of all of God's people gathered around the throne of God.

They're not saying woe is me, they're not acknowledging their sin anymore, but rather they are praising in an intimate way and looking on and gazing upon the face of God himself.

Because their sin is blotted out as Isaiah's was, blotted out not by a call from the altar but by the death of that holy seed on the cross through his blood.

In heaven we will gaze on God face to face, the holy God. because we will have been made holy through the blood of the Saviour King to come.

Amen.