

Reverence in worship

Littlebourne - Sunday 9th November 2025 - Isaiah 6:1-8

Isaiah 6:1-8:

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. 2 Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he 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 And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. 5 And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

6 Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. 7 And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”

8 And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send me.”

To set the scene, King Uzziah has just died. 2 Chronicles 26:16-23 tell us about his death. God's law had made clear that no king of Israel could be a priest - these were separate offices. Moreover, only the sons of Aaron could be priests. But king Uzziah entered the temple of the Lord and went to burn incense on the altar. The priests stop him, warn him and tell him to leave. But he becomes angry about this and then God afflicts him with leprosy. He lives the rest of his days suffering from leprosy, unable to visit the temple, until he dies and the throne passes to his son.

We're reminded at the very beginning of Isaiah's vision that any kind of improper worship can be fatal. Entering God's presence is not something to take lightly. Even the king of Israel wasn't safe from the presence of God.

But Isaiah is brought into this presence and sees God - sees Him sitting on His throne.

v2-3

We're told that there are seraphim, angels with six wings, who cover their eyes at the sight. Not even these mighty angels dare gaze upon God directly.

They also cover their feet - think about when Moses met God at the burning bush, and had to remove his sandals for it was holy ground. It's not that his sandals were somehow unholy in ways that his feet weren't, but that this is a recognition and symbol of the holiness of where God's presence rests.

The angels sing 'Holy, Holy, Holy'. Today, in our songs, we repeat things with little thought, but the significance of this repetition can't be understated. When we see repetition like this, it is for emphasis. For example, Jesus sometimes says 'Truly, truly, I tell you...', meaning this is something really true and we should pay attention.

[[In Genesis 14 we see something similar when it says about the pits in the valley of Siddim that the fleeing kings fell into. In Hebrew they're not just pits through - it calls them 'pit pits'. It just repeats the word for emphasis. There are pits and there are pits, and this was the latter. The pittiest of pits.]]

Very rarely in scripture is something emphasised to the third degree. We get three woes in Revelation 8, talking of God's dreadful judgement on the earth. Jeremiah repeats his pronouncement three times for effect in Jeremiah 7. But the only attribute of God that we get emphasised three times is Holy, Holy, Holy. We're being told that this is important, not

to be missed. God's holiness is emphasised like nothing else.

v4

Even the throneroom itself trembles at the sight of God. Even the inanimate foundations can't help but be moved by what is in their presence. And the room is filled with smoke, as if the room itself wants to hide itself from this holy sight.

v5

But the most trembling one in the scene is Isaiah, who is beginning to understand the situation he's in - he's face to face with the Thrice Holy God.

He says 'woe is me'. That might just sound like an old fashioned way of saying 'oh no', but when we look at the other places that the word woe is used, it's saying something more. The prophets, such as Isaiah, would begin their positive oracles with 'blessed'. We see Jesus do the same - 'blessed are those who mourn', 'blessed are the poor in spirit', etc. And we see the prophets start their negative oracles with 'woe'. 'Woe to you scribes and pharisees' says Jesus, and already up to this point in the book of Isaiah there have been eight uses of 'woe' that Isaiah has used to call out particular people and their sins, proclamations of God's judgement on such people.

So when Isaiah does the same, but about himself, this is serious. He is calling down God's judgement now upon himself, uttering a prophetic word that He is deserving of God's wrath.

He says that he's lost, ruined, undone. If anyone had it together, it was Isaiah son of Amoz. For the Kings of Israel at the time, this was their go to man for prophetic advice. He was considered a holy person. But the moment he enters into the presence of God, he's confronted with true holiness, the absolute standard of holiness, and he is exposed.

We all like to compare ourselves to people worse than us - that works out well. When we compare ourselves to others better than ourselves, we can often find excuses or ways in which we are better in some specific way than them. But when we are confronted with God, what can we say but that we're undone? What we can say than that we can't possibly compare?

Isaiah immediately recognises that he is sinful - he's a man of unclean lips. It might be an odd thing to leap to, but maybe because Isaiah's main job as a prophet was speaking, that's what came to mind first - what he thought he was good at, what everyone commended him for, was worthless and revealed as sinful, when he saw God in His holiness.

This didn't just affect his view of himself either, but his view of everyone else - he says he dwells in the midst of a people just like him, with unclean lips too. He describes them just like him - he sees that he's nothing special compared to the rest. He sees that sin is pervasive in himself and all humanity.

His eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts. He understands God better and himself better.

v7

And of course something must be done about it. A coal, too hot for even the angel to touch, needing tongs to take it, is touched to Isaiah's lips. Our lips are amongst the most sensitive parts of us and they are seared with this hot coal, quarterising the wound of sin, sterilising these unclean lips.

The angels says "your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for". That's really the important part - not just his lips but all his sin was atoned for. But not without some pain.

The cost of sin

When we experience the forgiveness of God, it comes with pain. We must experience the weight of sin to feel the relief of atonement. We must feel the sting of repentance to make progress in our sanctification. All forgiveness comes with a cost.

The cost is in blood - "...without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins." Hebrews 9:22. The biggest cost was of course paid by Christ - the atonement for our sins came at the cost of His life.

v8

Isaiah has seen the glory of God, been burnt by the coal, and now he hears the voice of God. God asks who He shall send.

In the New Testament, the word Apostle means a sent one - those we think of as capital A Apostles, the twelve, Paul, were sent knowing there was a good chance of suffering for the mission. All but one of the twelve died at human hands, many gruesomely. In the Old Testament, those that were sent in this way, to carry God's message, were prophets, and they met no less a painful end often.

What is being asked here is something serious, that Isaiah of all people would know came with a cost. But he answers, "send me". He volunteers. From brokenness and sin to purpose and mission, this is the pattern of how God treats His people, and Isaiah is an exemplar of this.

Worship

But what has this to do with worship? Well it might have occurred to some of you that what we see in this passage is another instance that fits the pattern we've seen elsewhere of the model worship service.

We see that Isaiah is called by God to meet Him, whisked up to the throne room in this vision. He is convicted and confesses his sin, and receives cleansing from it. He hears God's voice, and finally he is sent out.

It's not a perfect fit - we don't have the 'communion' aspect as such explicitly shown in the sequence, but on the whole, it fits like the other examples in scripture - God calls, God cleanses, God consecrates with His word, God communes, and God commissions.

Reverence

What stands out in this particular sequence of events though is the holiness of God, and the reverence with which we must therefore come before Him.

I've quite recently stood up here and told you all to be joyful when we do communion, to smile and be glad and enjoy it. Be a good guest in God's house, not a downer and a misery guts. But as true as that is, that doesn't mean that any levity goes, or that we can ignore God's holiness. We are entering His house, where He is King, and there's a right respect

and reverence that we should have because of that.

Reverence is the natural byproduct of seeing God as He is. When people in the Bible encounter God, see His power, the result is fear, awe, reverence.

When the disciples are in the boat with Jesus in the storm, they're afraid because they know they might drown. But when Jesus calms the storm, they are even more afraid. Three times in the telling of that event in Mark 4:37-41, the word 'mega', translated for us as 'great', is used. Once for the storm, once for the calm that Christ brings, and lastly for the fear of the disciples. Not the fear they have during the storm, but the fear they have afterwards.

Another occasion before this, as recorded in Luke 5:2-11, Jesus tells Peter and co to let down their nets once more, after a long night of no catches. When they do so, they catch more than they can carry, so much that they are in danger of sinking. What's Peter's response? To fall down and say "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." His reaction is reverence and fear.

It is hard to bear being in the presence of the Holy God. Even the sinless angels in His presence cover their eyes.

Reverent Worship

There's no true worship without an element of reverence, an element of trembling. In God's house, the whole room trembles at His presence. The very foundations shake as He is revealed to us.

So for us that should make a difference. Coming to church is not just another social event. When God calls us into His presence each Sunday, we are not to act like it's just any other occasion. It's something more, something deserving of respect and reverence. We can enjoy it, and have a good time, but we also do it knowing it's more than what we do other days.

Recognising the holiness of God, and having real fear and reverence for Him helps us to avoid the perennial temptation to domesticate God. We imagine Him tame and invent for ourselves a God that better suits us. We want a God who is near, but not intrusive, holy but not demanding, forgiving but unconcerned with our actual conduct. A reverence for God shatters that idea - we have to accept God as the holy God He reveals Himself to be,

the God who terrifies and heals, who both exposes our sin and redeems us.

In our confession of sin we also need reverence for God. If we see God in His holiness, we will, like Isaiah see our ourselves for who we are - unholy and sinful. As we recognise our sin more acutely, we can rejoice more heartily in what God has done. Those that treat sins as little things, insignificant, with a God that just brushes them under the carpet, will not be very moved by what Christ did, because in that view, what did He do? But if we understand that our sin is an abomination to the holy God, and that the wrath due us was poured out on Christ in our place, then our confession of sin will be more meaningful, and our receiving of assurance that we are forgiven will be so much more joyful. Look at what God has done - it's a bigger deal than we can imagine.

Conclusion

In conclusion, rejoice and tremble. Worship God with joy and gladness, and with a righteous fear and awe.