

God is holy, holy, holy

Isaiah 6.1-13; Luke 5.1-11

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When Peter met with Jesus Christ for the first time, he asked Jesus to leave him, “for I am a sinful man, o Lord”.

Jesus had helped Peter and his mates to miraculously catch an enormous load of fish, and Peter realised” this is not a normal human being.

What is our proper response when meeti with the God of heaven and earth? “LORD, you are holy, and we are unholy, sinful, imperfect. Please do not destroy us by your holiness”.

Isaiah had a similar experience when he as a priest worshipped God in the temple, and he had a vision of God. “Woe is me, for I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips. For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.”

1. Called to praise and penitence

Isaiah had a vision of the throne of God – the Ark of the Covenant, covered by two angels. He gets a glimpse of the eternal worship of God in heaven.

Isaiah does not see God directly, but only part of his garment. No human being can see God and live. But the prophet sees two angels, Seraphim – the word means burning ones, or flames, each with six wings.

Even these angels cover their eyes: they cannot look at God. And they shout to each other the words we repeat after them in our liturgy:

Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory. (Isaiah 6.3)

The seraphim constantly praise God’s holiness. God is free from any defilement of evil. He is only love, only good, fully just, totally different from all of us.

The doors of the temple were shaking by an earthquake and smoke filled the temple; those were signs of the presence of God.



God's glory fills the place where Isaiah is. And the magnificence of God and the praise of the angels make Isaiah shrink in size. He realizes – 'I am not holy. I am not full of love and goodness as God is.'

Now this is strange. He is a prophet. God has been using him in the past. What is wrong with Isaiah? He is not so bad, is he?

I think we can certainly learn from this, that even lifelong followers of God, even mature Christians, never get past the point of trembling before the holy God. He is holy, and we are part of a wrong race; we are imperfect people.

Even knowing that we are children of God and that he is a forgiving God never stops us from being impressed by his holiness and our sinfulness.

I think the opposite is actually true. It is exactly when we, as forgiven sinners, just get a tiny glimpse of God in His glory, that we realize who we are. In the mirror of his light, we see our own darkness.



That is why each week here we begin our worship service with penitence. The sacrifice of Jesus Christ our Lord was perfect and once and for all; but we must return to God over and over again for the application of that generous forgiveness, humbly admitting our pitiful state and his greatness, our moral imperfection, and his goodness.

At Isaiah's distress over being a man of 'unclean lips', one of the Seraphim takes a coal from the altar and touches Isaiah's lips with the words 'your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out' (Isaiah 6.6).

This is the technical language of the rites of forgiveness in the temple.

As we partake in Holy Communion, we are reminded of the sacrifice, once-and-for-all, of Christ. Each week we return humbly to the table, praising our holy God, and inwardly kneeling as a symbol of our own unworthiness. And each week God says to us: 'Your sins have been forgiven, you can have full communion with me'.

This act of forgiveness comes entirely from the realm of God, freely and mercifully.

2. Called to preach

Immediately after Isaiah's experience of seeing the angels praise God's glory and after his penitence and after the forgiveness, God calls him to obedience.

The same actually happens to Peter and the other apostles. "I am a sinful man o Lord." And the response of our Lord Jesus Christ: "Do not be afraid, from now on you will be catching men."

Maybe this experience of your own unworthiness is not a hindrance for God to use you - it is a precondition.

God sends Isaiah and the apostles on a mission. The sequence here is important for all of us.

God wants our service, but by serving him we do not buy forgiveness; we do not serve God to earn his kindness toward us. Our service is our obedient and loving response to the great God who has already given us all we need –love and forgiveness and eternal life. Serving Him is not in order to get it right with God, but it is our normal response to his love.

At the end of our worship service we ‘go into the world to love and serve the Lord’. That is our mission.

God said to Isaiah: ‘Who shall I send and who shall go for us’.

Let us note here that those words ‘I’ and ‘us’ underline the fact that there is one God, but also that God is a plurality. This is certainly how the writers in the New Testament understood these words.

In John 12.41 words from Isaiah 6 are quoted and applied to Jesus Christ: ‘These things Isaiah said, because he saw His glory and he spoke of Him.’ Of Jesus.

Even Isaiah himself, he speaks of God Almighty being ‘high and lifted up’, and in Isaiah 52.12, he uses the exact same words, ‘high and lifted up’, but now about the Servant of the Lord, the Messiah - our Lord Jesus Christ.

And in Acts 28, the apostle Paul quotes the same words spoken by God to Isaiah, and concludes that ‘the Holy Spirit spoke through Isaiah.’ God in his fullness was there. God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

And when Isaiah heard the challenge of this Triune God, ‘Who shall I send and who shall go for us’, he was ready for it. Not because of guilt, but because of loving obedience to the almighty and forgiving God. ‘Here am I; send me!’

But well, Isaiah, that was not clever. Should you not first ask what God wants you to do? Where he will send you?

Before Isaiah even had a job description and before he knew his salary, he had already agreed. ‘I will do it’.

Now if Isaiah would have served God in our time, what ministry would he have expected?

My servant, I send you to start a megachurch

My son, go and begin a successful television ministry

My child, become an international preacher and write bestsellers

Begin a healing ministry

Build an orphanage

I send you to bless my people and to help them feel good about themselves. Be nice to all people and tell all people that I love them!

But Isaiah offered himself to serving God, without knowing the job description. God tells him what he expects him to do. And it was a devastating command! Just like the apostles, when they were called by Jesus, were hardly aware of how that would change their life. And they all died for it.

Isaiah was sent to speak in such a way that no one would understand what he was saying. Their eyes and ears would be useless, their minds would be clouded with confusion. As a result, their healing would be delayed and their punishment became justified and certain.

Their cities will be destroyed, the people will be killed. What Isaiah had to preach did not make their lives easier; it did not draw them to God. Does God not understand that this is not the way to build his Kingdom? With such a message people will not fill the pews, they will not pay to the church, not become members!

3. Called to patience

When we think of serving God, we often define this in terms of what we would like to get from him. What we consider desirable. We love to serve God as long as he is the Great Santa. It becomes harder when his desires are so different from our natural inclinations.

Isaiah was used by God to bring judgement over Israel. He did not have a pleasant ministry.

Are we only prepared to obey and love him when what he asks of us is in line with what suits us? Or do we also love and obey him in all other circumstances? Do we only obey and love God when it makes us popular? When it is good for our career? When it makes us comfortable? If so, we may actually mostly obey and love ourselves.

But knowing God in his holiness and mercy should make our surrender to God just as unconditional as that of Isaiah. It is exactly in that unconditional surrender that we show our love to him. Do we trust him to do with our lives what is best?

I do not suggest a sort of piety that enjoys all things that happen to us or all things God asks from us. Not everything that God asks of us is 'nice'. Isaiah was so depressed from this message of God, that he asked God: 'How long? How long will this continue?'



‘Until cities lie waste and death seems to have overcome all.’ Only then, and in only a small way, change will come.’ But these last words of God to Isaiah hold the secret: ‘like a tree cut down and burnt the people of God will be, but...but...the holy seed is its stump.’

God promises renewal. There is ‘holy seed’ in the tree that is cut off...God is Holy, and we read about Holy Seed. One with the same holy character as that of God, will come from the nation that is punished by God... Jesus Christ, the Son of God. God from God, Light from Light.

But that would be seven centuries later. Obeying and loving God requires patience. And faith. God may not fulfill his plans in our lifetime. We know how glorious the end will be. But for now, we need patience knowing also how difficult the road of life sometimes is.

The prophet who saw the glory of the Lord fill the earth, had to accept that for a long time, this reality would hardly be visible. What is visible around us is a world where beauty and joy and love seem to be forever mixed up with ugliness, sadness and hatred.

But even in the midst of this, Isaiah saw God’s glory over all the earth. One day, it will be tangible and concrete for all to see, but even now, already, God rules over all. He fulfills his plans. He cannot be stopped. Nothing that happens to us, even today, is beyond his grasp and will. But be patient and wait for Him!

Conclusion

With countless congregations across the world we sing the ‘Holy, holy, holy’, in the prayer before communion; we echo the cry of the angels in heaven. God is full of love, full of perfection. And, thank God, He is full of mercy and forgiveness as well.

That is why we offer our souls and our bodies to him –this is our logical service, caused by his love for us.

God our Father wants us to tell this world that Jesus Christ is Lord. He has come to turn the world upside down; for with God, the last are first, the least are the greatest, and the greatest among us is a servant.

These old words of Jesus are met by dull ears, sightless eyes, and clouded minds. Sometimes also by resistance against the message and against those who speak that message. Those who serve God today often bear the pain of this service.

To follow God does not always result in great congregations, successful ministries, and happy lives. It will certainly make us also cry out to God: ‘How much longer...’ Then God tells us: wait a bit, have patience.

And in the meantime, we will not stop praising our Lord God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. For He is holy, holy, holy.

+ Amen