

Holiness and reverence

‘In the year that King Uzziah died...’ Thus begins our reading from the prophet Isaiah this morning, as Isaiah enters the great edifice of the Jerusalem temple and there, much to his surprise, he is confronted with a vision of God that quickly overwhelms him. And we might wonder why we are given this historical detail, why we are told that this happened in the year that King Uzziah died. Do we really need to know that? Indeed I wonder if any of you could tell me which year that was - which year we are talking about. I wonder if we were to guess if we would even get close. Well, let me tell you. We are talking about the year 742 BC and I’ll make one suggestion as to just why the prophet tells us this.

I would suggest to you that it might just be because the death of King Uzziah in 742 BC was a kind of a turning-point in the life of the kingdom of Judah. Put very simply, the first part of the 8th century BC, when Uzziah was on the throne, was a time of stability and prosperity in the life of God’s people of Jerusalem and Judah. These were good times. But the second part of the century, after Uzziah’s death, was very different. Due largely to the rise of the latest superpower in the region, the empire of Assyria, the years following Uzziah’s death were tumultuous and dangerous, full of conflict and intrigue and destruction. In other words the death of Uzziah in 742 BC was like a kind of a hinge or a tipping point after which everything changed for the worse. And maybe it is significant therefore that it is at that moment in time that Isaiah enters the temple and glimpses this vision of God - God sitting on a throne, high and lofty, God the hem of whose robe fills the temple, God before whom the seraphim chorus in pure praise, their wings veiling their faces from the dazzling glory of the divine. Put it this way. Maybe it is in times of uncertainty, in times of instability and upheaval and crisis that we need to be able to lift our gaze to the beyond. Maybe it is at those times that we need to raise our eyes above time and to eternity, above the din and clamour of the earth to the exalted song of heaven, beyond the chaos of life to the glory of heaven. What better time than when an earthly king dies to be reminded of the immortal king of heaven whose rule never ends?

So it is that in the maelstrom of earthly kingdoms and conflicts Isaiah encounters the sovereign God – but of course this is not a comfortable

2

experience for him. While the heavenly host proclaim 'holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts' Isaiah exclaims 'woe is me! I am lost'. Confronted with the living God Isaiah is undone for, after all, is it not said that no-one can see God and live?

Now - what Isaiah is coming up against here is the sheer holiness of God. Just think of the scene: the throne high and lofty, and the smoke that fills the precincts, and the shaking of the thresholds and that threefold refrain of the seraphim, 'holy, holy, holy...' Here are the sights and the sounds and the smells that signal the holiness of God. And what do we mean by the holiness of God? What do we associate with holiness? Well, when we speak of God's holiness we are really combining a number of qualities. We are referring to what we might call the 'otherness' of God, the fact that God is sovereign and exalted and before God we are very small and fragile, mere dust. And God's holiness reminds us that we may not easily or casually approach God for to draw near to the divine presence is highly risky and in that presence our lives are in deepest jeopardy. And of course God's holiness is bound up with God's purity, for God is light and in God there dwells no darkness - while we are creatures of the dark, residents of shadowlands. And to be exposed to the radiance of God's luminous glory is to risk being dazzled and blinded. God's holiness, however, is also God's love. I think it is a mistake that we often seem to set God's holiness over against God's love as if they were in tension with one another. In fact the two are inseparable, but God's love is searing and intense, not schmaltzy and sentimental. This is a fierce love that burns like fire. And in our passage we see the connection between holiness and love for no sooner has Isaiah felt exposed and sinful before the vision of God and no sooner has he cried out in despair, 'woe is me! I am lost!' than God reaches out to him with that live coal taken from the altar. And the coal touches Isaiah's lips, and it cleanses and purifies. And that is a gesture of pure grace. Isaiah, lost and floundering before God's purity is not driven from God's presence. He's not banished from the temple precincts, expelled in judgement - no, God reaches out in grace to cleanse. And in that burning coal do we not catch a glimpse of the one who is to come, the Christ in whom God will reach out to cleanse and purify us - Christ the burning, cleansing coal?

Here then is holiness, and parts of the Old Testament like the book of Leviticus are basically all about how we can live with God's holiness, how we order life such that we can cohabit with God and accommodate to divine

holiness. And I wonder if the holiness of God is something that we need to recapture today. Somebody has said that nowadays, if we acknowledge God at all, we worship ‘the Lord God Almighty’. We turn God into a kindly uncle figure and Jesus becomes your best buddy and God is diminished and domesticated, and the consequences are far-reaching. You see, when we eclipse God’s holiness what we lose is reverence, for reverence is the quality in us that corresponds to the holiness of God. And the Bible is suffused with reverence for God. The Israelites would not even speak the name of God, they would not take the divine name upon their lips so holy was it considered. There is reverence for you, reverence before the sacred. But what happens when we lose all sense of the holy? What happens when every trace of the sacred is profaned? What do we become? If I may quote one of the great songs of the unsurpassable Bob Dylan in which he laments a world where we

‘make everything from toy guns that spark
to flesh-coloured Christs that glow in the dark.
It’s easy to see without looking too far
That not much is really sacred.

And I can’t help worrying that when we lose all sense of the holy and the sacred then we lose the habit of reverence and then we are in trouble.

It’s been so interesting these past few weeks doing this ‘God Question’ course in our midweek fellowship. We’ve been considering the origins and nature of the universe – the extraordinary complexity of the cosmos and the mystery of its beginnings. And if Isaiah chapter 6 takes us back to 420 BC to the Jerusalem temple and to God, exalted above and beyond it – well, these programmes we have been watching take us back 13.8 billion years to the Big Bang that launched our universe into being and the inevitable question of whether there is a God exalted and beyond that. What was there before the Big Bang, if that question even make sense? And we have all the usual suspects lining up to tell us that there is no such God and that in time we will unravel the mystery of how something can come out of nothing. And many atheist scientists seem very concerned to make the point that just because they are not ‘religious’ that does not mean that they do not feel awe and wonder before the fact and splendour of the universe. As our friend Richard Dawkins puts it, ‘The feeling of awed wonder that science can give us is one of the highest experiences of which the human psyche is capable.’ And indeed scientific exploration of the universe does indeed provoke awe and wonder at the majesty

of the cosmos and the beauty and elegance of its laws, but I would suggest that awe and wonder are not enough to save us. I would suggest that we need to rediscover reverence, reverence for creation, reverence for nature, reverence for life – and reverence require a sense of the holy. When we ponder the universe and contemplate the mystery of the Big Bang and what went before it we need a sense not just of amazement – we need more, we need a sense that we are standing on holy ground.

It was the great humanitarian Albert Schweitzer who coined the phrase ‘reverence for life’, and that is a striking phrase, arguably one that we would do well to rediscover. It seems, does it not, that the massive advance of science and technology in recent centuries, with its immense potential for destruction and dehumanisation, requires some kind of accompanying ethic of reverence for life, and indeed reverence for nature, if we are to avoid destroying ourselves and our environment. Science and technology, after all, are double-edged. They can take us either way. They can take us to progress or they can take us to Armageddon - and an attitude of reverence for life might be needed to tilt the world away from death and the destruction of the planet and toward fulfilment and abundant life. It seems that respect for life is not enough. Evidently awe at the wonder of life is not succeeding in curbing our destructive tendencies. We need reverence. We need reverence before the face of a fellow human being. We need reverence before the miracle of nature with its rhythms and its laws. We need reverence before the immense mystery of the universe. But reverence require a sense of the holy. Reverence means being struck dumb, being humbled and chastened before the sacred. And nothing else will save us.

So – the prophet Isaiah take us back 420 years before Christ, in the year that Uzziah died, where he raised his eyes to the heavens and saw the Lord, sitting on a throne, high and lofty, his train filling the temple. He encountered the holy One, and was humbled, and changed. Today we lift up our eyes to the heavens and we are transported back 13.8 billion years to when it all began. And there we encounter the holy One. And we know that all that exists in all its bewildering immensity and complexity – all that is and all that has ever been and all that ever will be is grounded in holiness. We know that the entire cosmos echoes with the seraphim’s song:

‘holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts,
the whole earth – the whole universe – is full of his glory!

And we know that whenever we look into the eyes of a fellow human being, and whenever we encounter with the wonder of nature, and whenever scientists unlock some deeper secret of creation, then we are standing on holy ground. And that calls from us reverence. Amen.

O gracious and holy God,
we pray for today for all those who strive
to uphold the sanctity of life –
for doctors and nurses and all
involved in the medical profession...
We pray for those who must make difficult ethical decisions
about when life should be terminated –
may all be done to safeguard the unique
value of every human person...
We pray for those involved in medical research –
for those researching into treatment for cancer,
and dementia, and HIV, and other life-threatening diseases.
We pray for those who work with the elderly,

and the disabled and the mentally ill...

And may we as a society learn how best to care
for the vulnerable and the disadvantaged
and may we release the necessary resources
and make the necessary provision.

And we pray for wisdom in how we live,
that we may find sustainable ways to inhabit
the world you have made,
and to coexist with our fellow species...

And God bless your church, the holy nation,
called to proclaim the mighty acts of him
who called us out of darkness into his marvellous light.

Reach out to cleanse us and empower us with your Holy Spirit
and make us responsive to your Word.

And bless today those who are sad or anxious –
those who struggle with the loss of loved ones,
those coping with change and who are struggling to let go...

May they know your comfort, your power and your peace.

We pray all these things in the name of Jesus, the holy One
to who be glory forever. Amen.