

What forms you.

I wonder how much you know about King Uzziah of Judah. I suspect that if this morning here in this church we were to pool all that we know about King Uzziah of Judah it would not amount to much, but I'll tell you a bit about him. I can tell you for example that he was also known as Azariah and that he lived in the 8th century BC; and I could tell you that his reign marked the end of a prosperous era in the life of his nation of Judah for it was a time of military success and impressive building programmes; and I could tell you that his rule represented something of a turning point as it also marked the beginning of a threat from the growing superpower of the day, the Empire of Assyria. And maybe all that would amount to more than you really care to know. The interesting thing though is that we might never have heard of King Uzziah at all if it were not for something that happened in the year that he died. For it was in that year that a man called Isaiah had a life-changing experience. Isaiah was in the temple in Jerusalem and there he had the most astounding epiphany, the most dramatic moment of revelation. There in the midst of the smoke and the silence Isaiah glimpsed heaven in all its splendour. There was the Most High seated on a throne, with the heavenly beings, the winged seraphim, surrounding him and the air was filled a symphony of praise, 'holy, holy' holy...', and there was the skirt of the robe of the Most High God filling the temple like the clouds of incense around him.

I wonder what that moment was like for Isaiah. I wonder if maybe in that moment Isaiah seemed to take leave of the earth. I wonder if maybe as he felt himself lifted up into heaven he became aware that the familiar world - the earthbound world of Jerusalem and the temple and the realm of international politics and the rise of Assyria - all that was falling away into insignificance. Well no, I don't think so, for while Isaiah was indeed lifted up into the heavenlies he was - and he remained - utterly rooted and grounded in the world around him. That is why he records those words: 'in the year that king Uzziah died...' In other words all this mystical, heavenly transcendence in the temple took place in the year when kingdoms clashed in the world around and armies gathered and threatened and battles were fought and decisions were made which profoundly affected the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judah and all the nations of the earth. It's those words 'in the year that King Uzziah died...' that

root the world of heaven in the world of flesh and blood and space and time. And we find this so often in Scripture don't we? So often when heaven stirs, it takes its bearings from events in the world. We think of verses at the beginning of the third chapter of Luke's gospel where John the Baptist is being introduced to us, preparing the way for Jesus: 'In the fifteenth year of the emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, when Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip prince of Uteraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias prince of Albine, during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas (pshaw!) – *the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness*' Do you see? The Word of came – but not in a vacuum, not in a bubble for John or for Isaiah. That word emerged from and was spoken into the matrix of human affairs.

What we learn here is that Isaiah is a citizen of two worlds. He is a citizen of 8th century Jerusalem with its deceased King Uzziah, but he is also a citizen of heaven where reigns the Most High. And in that hour in the temple these two worlds overlap in the person of Isaiah. 'In the year King Uzziah died I saw the Lord...' And of course as Christians we believe that those two realms have come together and been united once and for all in Jesus of Nazareth. As Christians we believe that in Jesus Christ heaven and earth have been joined, fused together by him who came from heaven to earth and back to heaven again. And so as Christians we pray regularly in the words that he taught us, 'thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven', and we yearn for the day when heaven and earth will rhyme for earth will be aligned with heaven and filled with the glory of God.

Of course our modern, 'enlightened', secular world no longer believes in that other dimension; and there are no angels in the nearer presence of God crying 'holy, holy' holy!'; and the world is not enveloped by celestial praise but only by a blank cosmic silence. And there is no one to touch our lives with burning coals and to cleanse us from our sin; and there is no one to speak a word to us from beyond. And so there is a hollowness at the heart of everything and our world is diminished and drained.

Well, in the light of all this I want to ask a question this morning, one that I think is raised by this passage as I hope we shall see. And that question is, 'what forms us?' What moulds and shapes our identities? What makes us who we are? You see, something we have become more and more aware of in recent times is how much we are shaped and formed by forces that are far beyond our control – how malleable and pliable we are. There is a lovely hymn which

begins, ‘we are not our own. Earth forms us’ and there is something beautiful about that as it shows how interconnected everything is. So ancient people believed that their lives were formed by the stars and their constellations and movements. And if at least officially we no longer ascribe to astrology we are nevertheless acutely aware in our modern world that we are not our own for we are formed by our DNA and the particular gene pool out of which we have emerged. And we are formed by our parents and our upbringing and the particular culture in which we have been nourished. And we are formed by the great powers of our day like the media. And Karl Marx exposed the ways in which we are formed economically; and Sigmund Freud opened up the realm of psychology and dynamics that form us but of which we have little or no awareness; and Friedrich Nietzsche exposed the dynamics of power – how they form and shape our world and us with it. And of course we are formed by the particular story of our lives, by the specific things that have happened to us and impinged upon us. So Isaiah was a product of 8th century Israel and the reign of King Uzziah and all that went with that.

But of course for us as believers this is not the whole story for there is another agency at work in our lives through whom we are shaped. And I want you to notice here what happens to Isaiah as he is called. Let’s just go over it once again. Isaiah enters the temple and there he glimpses God and he is utterly overcome by God’s holiness. The seraphim cry ‘holy!’ and Isaiah covers before God and he cries out, ‘Woe is me, I am doomed!’ But note what happens next. One of the seraphs flies and touches his lips and his iniquity is removed and his sin is wiped out. He is made clean, pure – in other words Isaiah is made holy too. Do you see what has happened? Isaiah has become like the one who is calling him. One minute there is a holy God, and there is Isaiah who is doubtless a fine, decent, upstanding citizen of Jerusalem but who in the presence of the holy God is revealed to be deeply tainted and unclean. And next moment there is a holy God and a holy Isaiah. The prophet has become like the one who calls him. The prophet is remade in God’s image.

The one who calls us forms us. I came across a beautiful illustration of this. It comes from the German philosopher Goethe who was reflecting upon light and colour and he said something very striking. He said, ‘The eye has light to thank for its being.’ Think about that: ‘The eye has light to thank for its own being’, and Goethe goes on, ‘Out of the indifferent frame Light has called an organ to be in its own image.’ Do you get that? Why do we have eyes? We

have eyes because we are surrounded by light. And it's as if over billions of years the drive of evolution has responded to the call of the light all around us and so the eye is formed, an organ made in Light's own image.

Here surely is the key to who we are and who we become. Yes, we are not our own and earth forms us – for better or for worse. Earth forms us but often disfigures us and misshapes us. But the key to our identity lies in our relationship with one who is able to gather up all the loose threads of who we are, the good and the bad, and weave them into someone who is truly us. In Goethe's terms, the eye of our identity is formed as we respond to God's light that surrounds us.

Paul is saying the same thing in our reading from the Letter to the Romans. He admonishes us there not to live according to the flesh, and this is simply life without God and without the Spirit of God. There are too many powers and influences upon us to be at the mercy of the world. But then he writes, 'For all who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God.' There is where our true identity lies, with the Spirit of God who takes broken misshapen, disfigured lives and forms us into children of God.

So in the year 2018, when international relations are in disarray and nations clash, on Holy Trinity Sunday, the people of the English Reformed Church in Amsterdam gather, formed by earth for good or ill. And as we worship a whole other world is revealed. We look up and there sits the most High, our origin and our destiny, high and lofty. And in our midst sits Jesus who holds together the world of the most High and the familiar world from where we have gathered. And among us and between us and in our songs and our words we sense the Spirit moving. Here, where these two worlds meet, is the crucible of our identity. Here, where these two worlds are joined by Christ, we find ourselves formed into the image of the holy God. Here, where the Spirit moves and the seraphim sing, we are formed into children of God. Amen.