



Isaiah 6.1-8
Luke 5.1-11
6th February 2022

Midwinter Hope

Gracious God, we thank you for your word in scripture and made flesh in the Lord Jesus Christ. Help us now to catch your voice and speak, we pray, to our hearts and minds. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Nine years ago Justin Welby entered Canterbury Cathedral and dedicated himself as Archbishop. A call that he believed had not only come from the Queen and Prime Minister but ultimately a call from God.

The service that spring day started differently from any other held for an archbishop before. After knocking on the door of the cathedral with his shepherd's staff and being given entry he was met by a 17 year old girl who led the liturgy at that point. In the hushed cathedral of 2000 worshippers she almost challenged him with the opening question: *Who are you and why have you come here?* It was a wonderfully theatrical start.

He responded: *I am Justine, a servant of Jesus Christ and I come seeking the grace of God so that we can travel together.*

They were great words. All of us can be called by God. All of us can be used by God. All of us can be a servant of God.

And maybe that is in our minds this morning as we remember that 70 years ago today a Princess became Queen whilst watching wildlife from a tree house in Kenya. Our Queen has shown us, through her great devotion, what it is to be a person who is faithful to her calling. Elizabeth the Second has, by the grace of God, lived a life of exemplary and inspirational service, for which we give heartfelt thanks on this of all days, her accession day.

Of course, the call of God isn't reserved just for those who stand centre stage. We can serve God in a thousand and one ways, and every one of them has meaning and purpose. The important thing is a willing heart and a mind that understands our role as a servant.

So, let's go from one dramatic scene in a great cathedral to another, this time in a seraph filled temple.

That's because today's reading from the Jewish scriptures we enter a celestial world. The images Isaiah sets before us are in poetry, not prose. He takes us to a place and a moment in time that changed his life. We don't know if he's describing a vivid dream or a heightened experience of prayer. What he tells us

is that he enters this mystical world as a reluctant participant in the things of God yet leaves as a willing enthusiast.

Not much about the book we call Isaiah is historically coherent but commentators date these words as being written around 800 years before Christ.

Isaiah chapter 6 locates the timeline to the death of King Uzziah, a monarch who had already abdicated in favour of his son, but whose continued presence even in retirement gave the nation stability. However, with his ultimate passing that security had been blown away. The days now seemed darker and the future more fragile. Angst was in the air.

Against this backdrop the reluctant Isaiah is transported to a totally other world. Some parts of it seem familiar, like the location of the temple, other aspects, like the singing, fiery seraphs whose music made the earth shake, are the stuff of myth and legend.

In this arena filled with the divine presence and the worship of the seraphim God calls for a willing servant, someone who will speak for him. Isaiah hides and protests that he is a man of unclean lips. Yet this is remedied as a live coal is placed upon his mouth, an ancient symbol of God's forgiveness and cleansing.

Now, touched and blessed by God, Isaiah is utterly transformed. Was it the worship? Was it the vision of God filling the temple, the sense of God's completeness? Was it the forgiveness and new beginnings brought about by the live coal touching his lips? Was it all of these? Whatever it was, Isaiah is forever changed and in response to God's call says: *Here am I Lord, send me.*

The context of Isaiah's call doesn't, in the first instance, look promising. These were bleak days for the nation and it's clear that the candle of belief in Israel was flickering so much that it was in danger of being snuffed out.

So, perhaps it's fitting that we read these words from the lectionary cycle around mid-winter. February can be a tough month with the road to Spring still seeming a long walk.

For Israel it felt like mid-winter too. As was so often the case in their history, the nation was insecure, under attack from the Assyrians. Yet again, everything felt fragile and with the fear that they would soon be dominated by a foreign power the people were beginning to lose hope.

Fear and uncertainty have been our travelling companions in recent times. I remember when it became clear the Pandemic was coming our way, behind the scenes we started to make provision for a church closure we anticipated would last no longer than three weeks; next month, of course, it will have been with us for two years.

Yet, even at the bleakest moment we can be inspired by God's hope that comes among us through prayer and people. It's like an Advent hope, living in darkness yet longing for light.

I was reminded of that whilst sitting in the Royal Opera House last month. Before the performance started, as the houselights dimmed, those famous curtains were not quite closed and just a chink of light shone out. Momentarily we glimpsed the light on stage as we sat in darkness in the auditorium and our hopes rose.

Isaiah was called to be an instrument of hope, even during the bleakest of days.

And his initial reaction was to put up a barrier to his calling. His objection was *I am a man of unclean lips*.

Here is someone whose conscience weighs heavily upon his heart. He's deeply aware of his failings and limitations, and perhaps the best leaders always are.

We would never use the term *unclean lips* today, yet it's all too obvious that words, our words have the power to hurt as well as heal. Cyber Bullying, Hate Speech and Name Calling blight our society when words become venomous.

Michelle Obama wrote appreciatively of her upbringing when she said: *We learned about honesty and integrity, that truth matters and that you don't take shortcuts or play by your own rules...*

In today's dream like story God, as it were, touches Isaiah's lips. That touch of forgiveness and renewal brings fresh integrity. It changes Isaiah to think that God has blessed him and equipped him for the task. And now, after that live coal has cleansed his lips, now he feels he can speak God's words of hope to a people in despair.

Isaiah's transformation is fascinating and helpful to us.

We are still in the church season of Epiphany when we recall the different ways God, in his grace, reveals his love and light to us.

God's revelation brings vision and isn't that what's happening in today's reading from the Jewish Scriptures? It's also the sub text in the New Testament story. The disciples are downcast after a night's fruitless fishing yet Jesus intervenes and the catch is enormous. Something of God is revealed among them and they are changed. And perhaps in years to come, when the going is tough, their minds will go back to that scene on the lakeshore when they glimpsed God at work in their backyard, and their hearts will be lifted and their hope restored.

So, Isaiah enters into worship in a time of crisis and it changes him. The worship brings perspective and this vision which is located in God's time and space, it brings him hope.

Worship can do that. It has a divine chemistry about it as a time in private prayer or collectively in church is touched by the Holy Spirit and we catch a vision that energises and

deepens our faith.

Perhaps it was the picture of God's robe filling the temple? I like to think those flying, fiery seraphs had something to do with it, whose singing rocked the building. So, no pressure choir, but we need some fiery seraph like singing from time to time!!

Isaiah had a vision of worship and it changed him. The cotton plantation slaves gathered for worship at the river and sang the Spirituals that gave them hope. And we, in bleak days caught a service on Zoom or listened in to an Audio recording and we got through.

There's something going on here which is good and of God. Worship creates vision, and vision brings hope.

Well, as I bring today's sermon to a close I'm conscious I began it with an archbishop and a queen, filled it with the story of an Old Testament prophet, so I want to end it by saying again that God's call and commission is for everyone.

Today's time in church concludes with Communion and although it may not be so dramatic, it can be immensely meaningful for us to place something on our lips today. The bread and wine.

They speak to us of the service, the loving, sacrificial service of our Saviour, Jesus Christ. The one who commissioned his disciples before his ascension to go into all the world and share his love.

He still calls us to be his servants today. It may not be easy or straightforward service, it can involve sacrifice. None of that should surprise because Jesus led the way and showed us that living with love has challenging and tough days.

So, as you eat and drink this morning sense again God's call upon your life even as you long for the life of Jesus to touch your lips and enter your heart. Feel yourself commissioned as a servant to live and speak for Jesus Christ.

And quietly and sincerely – having eaten the bread and drunk the wine, respond to God's invitation to each of us in church this morning to join him in his mission of love by praying in your heart, *Here am I Lord. Send me*

May it be so in the name of the one whose glory fills the temple, and whose praise is sung in the four corners of the earth by fiery seraphs and sincere worshippers. Amen.