

ALL SAINTS CHURCH

SUNDAY 14 APRIL 2024

**UNCERTAIN TIMES ...UNSETTLING VISION ...
UNCOMFORTABLE MESSAGE**

ISAIAH 6 1: 10

And so we come to the second in our series on the book of Isaiah entitled 'The power of Godly Vision.' Ah vision. The vision thing. A much used word, not least, perhaps surprisingly in the world of business and the corporate sector. Business often talk about 'our mission' or 'our vision'. Mission and vision are words borrowed straight from Church. And we love to quote the verse from Proverbs as did Tom Yacomeni last week "Where there is no vision the people perish"

Apparently one church had that on their outside noticeboard. The church didn't have much money and so they had those letters that you can stick on. Unfortunately one of the letters had fallen off. It was the very first letter. So instead of reading "*Where there is no vision the people perish*" it read "*HERE there is no vision the people perish*"

Back in the days when I used to get paid for working ... I did a lot of interviewing for jobs in education, especially headteacher posts. Sometimes they were for tiny little village schools, sometimes they were for schools of 1400 and sometimes they were for schools that had no pupils and had not even been built.

Nearly always there was a question to do with vision. Often it would be the subject of a presentation. I suspect that Tom probably had to answer a question about his vision for the future of the benefice when he came for interview nearly two years ago. It was not like that back in the old days The author of Onward Christian Soldiers, the Rev Sabine Baring-Gould, inherited a large estate and fortune in Devon and on the death of the incumbent (his great uncle) he appointed himself vicar. No interviews necessary there. He once said this about the clergy of Exeter Diocese:

"For the most part, the clergy of the Diocese of Exeter can be divided into those who have gone out of their minds and those who have no minds to go out of." It would be framed something like this:

Fortunately neither is true our own dear Rector.

Anyway back to interviewing and questions about vision. They would usually be something like:

- What is your vision of a good education?
- What would be expect this school to be like in five-years' time under your leadership?
- How would you set about creating and defining a vision for this school?

Those answering the question were expected to paint a picture in words that would inspire, that would be positive, that would speak of high standards, a caring community, a school where parents were clamouring to get their children

enrolled. These things were especially important if the school was in a bit of a mess, had perhaps failed an Ofsted inspection, had poor examinations results and a negative perception in the community. The interviewing panel were looking for a candidate who could turn the ship around, get it out of stormy seas and moving in calm sunny waters.

This was not how it was with Isaiah or his message. Although there are many shafts of sunlight, of hope and future promise in the 66 chapters of Isaiah (especially from chapter 40 onwards), there is much more along the lines of *“the nation is headed for terrible times ahead because of the moral vacuum and faithlessness of the people, especially the rich and powerful.”* It is not a message that people wanted to hear. His vision would not have won him the post of official prophet and counsellor to the Court and Temple in Judah.

What we find in this passage – or perhaps what I have found in this passage is:

- **Uncertain times**
- **An unsettling vision**
- **An uncomfortable message**

And we find echoes all three in our own day and age and in our own mission as a church.

UNCERTAIN TIMES

Firstly uncertain times.

If you were here last week, or if you know your Isaiah from your Jeremiah, you will know that Isaiah was called by God to this position of responsibility at a critical time in the nation’s history. The old King Uzziah who had reigned over the southern kingdom of Judah for more than 50 years was ailing and in fact died in the year of Isaiah’s extraordinary vision of the Holy Lord in his Holy Temple.

Uzziah had started well but finished badly: The Book of Chronicles says of him:

‘Uzziah was sixteen years old when he became king and reigned for fifty-two years in Jerusalem ... He behaved well in the eyes of God, following in the footsteps of his father Amaziah. He was a loyal seeker of God. He was well trained by his pastor and teacher Zechariah to live in reverent obedience before God, and for as long as Zechariah lived, Uzziah lived a godly life. And God prospered him.

Under his leadership the nation prospered economically, in defence, in foreign affairs and spiritually. But as is so often the case with successful leaders both secular and spiritual, their success and their power goes to their heads. They see themselves as infallible.

Chronicles says:

But after Uzziah became powerful, his pride led to his downfall.’

In fact he overstepped the mark of his kingly authority by assuming a priestly authority. As a result he became infected with leprosy and his end is a sad outcome for one who had begun so well.

Uzziah had his skin disease for the rest of his life and had to live in quarantine; he was not permitted to set foot in The Temple of God. When Uzziah died ... his skin disease disqualified him from burial in the royal cemetery.

So his son Jotham becomes king. This is the year that Isaiah also his vision of God. It is also probably the same year that the king of the northern kingdom of Israel was assassinated. These are uncertain and difficult times.

Ahead lay uncertainty and threat – especially from the Assyrians, a fearsome, aggressive, warring nation who had already turned the northern kingdom of Israel into a compliant state and would soon wipe it off the face of the earth.

We too live in uncertain, dangerous and disturbing times. We wake this morning to the news of the Iranian attack on Israel and wonder where it is all going to end. We hear the news that Russia is winning the war. We wonder what China will do when it truly becomes the world's super-power. We are anxious for our own country – politically, economically, morally. We worry as to what kind of future our children and grandchildren. Every month we hear more worrying statistics about climate change – and so on. And most challenging for us we see a nation bit by becoming entirely disconnected from the Christian faith. And often more than disconnected but openly hostile to it.

Isaiah lived in uncertain difficult times. So do we.

AN UNSETTLING VISION

And it was in those uncertain times, In the year that King Uzziah died, that Isaiah had this extraordinary vision and **it was an unsettling vision.**

A vision not unlike the one that the apostle John had and which we heard again from the book of Revelation Both visions are overwhelming. For once the word 'awesome' is justified in describing them.

Here is the Lord high and exalted seated on a throne surrounded by six seraphim, angels who are flying around even though they cover their eyes with their wings. The royal train that flows from the throne fills the vast space of the Temple. There is an altar and there is smoke from the altar and maybe from the incense burning on the altars. The noise is deafening so much so that the doorposts and threshold are shaking.

*“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”*

Words that we say in the communion service. Words that are often set to music. Maybe you have heard the Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus by Bach or Gounod or Schubert. Music which sets the hairs tingling on the back of your neck. When we first came to All Saints we used to sing the Schubert version of Holy, Holy, Holy in communion. I miss it.

And if you don't know the Sanctus from Gounod's St Cecilia Mass, I recommend you go home and find it on YouTube or iTunes and play it at full volume. It will give you a little taste of what Isaiah would have felt on that day in that moment and which would no doubt stayed with him for the rest of his life.

[Here it is <https://youtu.be/-xON2cqEJxc?si=jcAyC-yjmib527ND>]

And what is Isaiah's response? The same as our response would be. It is awe, fear, a sense of his own unworthiness, of his frailty of his uncleanness in the presence of this all powerful, creator full of holiness and splendour. This is the Creator of the universe.

Did you see that report this week about the greatest light ever observed by human beings? It was first observed in 2022 by those telescopes that are circulating in space. Astronomers say it is the enormous flash of light from a dying star that exploded. It is so far away and the universe so vast that it has taken 2.3 billion years to get to our tiny, tiny solar system.

That is an extraordinary, verging on the scary, fact to get our heads around. And there is Isaiah faced with just the equivalent of one atom of the power and light of God and quite rightly his knees turn to jelly and he knows he cannot stand upright in the presence of God.

It is an unsettling vision. From time to time we need to be unsettled and jolted out of our spiritual comfort zone. Someone once said "*We turn to God for help when our foundations are shaking, only to learn that it is God shaking*

them. In Isaiah's vision, there was a shaking and this foreshadowed the shaking of the nation that was to come.

If suddenly this place was filled with a vision like that we would be unsettled. We would be awestruck. We would be fearful. Maybe we need to experience a bit more of that awesomeness of God.

You know there are many balancing acts we have to do in Christian theology and in Christian practice and one of those balancing acts is to do with the balance between the God who asks us to call him Abba, who assures us of his deep love for us, invites us to sit down and eat with him, who wants us to know him and be known by him, who invites us into intimacy. And there is the God of royal authority, of unimaginable power, majesty, holiness, purity, otherness for whom the only physical response is to kneel or prostrate ourselves before him. As in so many things we can veer towards unhelpfully to one side or the other. We can treat God as if he were 'a mate'. We can come into his presence as if we were visiting the pub or someone's home and can spiritually kick our shoes off and put our feet up. No sense of reverence. No sense of stepping into the throne room or a royal palace. On the other hand we can approach God in a cringing fearful way – seeing him only as Judge, as someone who wants to tower over us. Both extremes are wrong but both approaches have their time and place and need their time and place in our lives and in our coming together as a community of believers.

We need both awe and joy in our experience of God. An awareness of his love but also of his Lordship over our lives.

We need to be comforted and reassured but from time to time we need a sense of God that shakes us, that unsettles us.

AN UNCOMFORTABLE MESSAGE

I am not going to spend any time on Isaiah's response to the vision and the question answer between him and the Lord God:

Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?"

And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"

Except to observe that every child of God is a messenger of God and is commissioned to go in his name. It is always a call to go. It is always a commissioning for service.

It is the uncomfortable message that I want to end with. You see God did not send Isaiah out with the words *"when you preach this, everyone will turn from their wicked ways and will come back to me. There will be a revival in the land. The evil forces outside and inside the nation will be vanquished and all will dwell in peace and safety."*

Far from it. Isaiah is explicitly told his message will not be heard will not be received. In fact he seems to be told to actually make sure they do not hear the word:

*Make the heart of this people calloused;
make their ears dull
and close their eyes
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,*

*hear with their ears,
understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed."*

This is strange and this is hard. And Isaiah's response is *"how long have I got to go on doing this?"* and the answer comes back

*Until the cities lie ruined
and without inhabitant,
until the houses are left deserted
and the fields ruined and ravaged,
until the Lord has sent everyone far away
and the land is utterly forsaken.*

Wow! Thank you God!

It's hard being a prophet in a place where no one wants to hear what you have to say. It's hard being a faithful preacher and teacher of the gospel when people do not respond. It is hard to go against the accepted standards of the day and challenge the moral and cultural status quo. It's especially hard when you may have to do this for years and years and see very little fruit.

But throughout the history of the church that is the way it has been and will be. You all know the parable of the sower which tells what the varying responses of people will be to hearing the gospel – which is both good news and in some ways bad news because it calls on us all to change direction. When Jesus was explaining the meaning of the parable to his disciples, he quoted these very verses from Isaiah about the spiritual visual

impairment and hearing impairment of people to the truth, And in the very last chapter of the book of Acts, when the apostle Paul has reached Rome after his eventful journey, we read:

Paul witnessed to the Jewish leaders from morning till evening, explaining about the kingdom of God, and from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets he tried to persuade them about Jesus. Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe. They disagreed among themselves and began to leave after Paul had made this final statement: "The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your ancestors when he said through Isaiah the prophet:

*"Go to this people and say,
"You will be ever hearing but never understanding;
you will be ever seeing but never perceiving."
For this people's heart has become calloused;
they hardly hear with their ears,
and they have closed their eyes.*

We have a wonderful message of grace, of love, of acceptance of the possibility of the power of God at work in our lives. It is a message and an invitation open to everyone. But the message is now all sweetness and light. There is an edge to it. The word of God is like a sword that cuts through men and women's deceptions, their weaknesses, their sinfulness. And we must somehow try to find ways of being authentic both to the grace and the truth of the gospel. And also recognizing that in so doing, many will find the message unbelievable, too hard and too uncomfortable.

In the case of Isaiah and many thousands of others it probably led to his martyrdom. Jewish tradition had it that King Manasseh so hated the message of Isaiah that he had him executed by sawing him in half. If you ever wondered about that verse in Hebrews 11 where it refers to those old Testament Saints who were 'sawed in two' and thought to yourself, who were they? Well that is probably a reference to the death of Isaiah.

An unsettling vision with an uncomfortable message in uncertain times. A man sawn in half. That's perhaps not the easiest thing to hear on a spring Sunday morning. But let me end on an upbeat message.

Isaiah may not have seen the country being revived spiritually and its fortunes changed for the good but his message outlasted kings and empires. Isaiah is the most quoted writer in the new testament and from our vantage point we can look back and see how what he preached has been fulfilled. Alongside the judgment there was promise of hope ...of the child that would be born who would be a wonderful counsellor and almighty God ...of the suffering servant who would be wounded for our transgressions ...of the feast that is to come when there will be no more tears or sadness ...when justice and righteousness will rule over all the earth ...of rough places being made smooth and of the ultimate triumph of God's goodness and holiness overall things.

We may see, probably will see further decline in the Western world of the Christian faith, of churches and of the number of Christians. But ultimately the gates of hell, of false truth, of

evil will not overcome the church of God, the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ or the Lord himself.

Do you believe that?

Amen.

Let's pray.