

Isaiah 6 – in the throne room
14.10.18, St Andrew's Chesterton

There are times – lots of times, I suspect – when you come to church – when I come to church – and it all seems pretty flat. I don't mean the singing. I mean the whole experience of worship. We come because for an hour and a bit a week we'd like to be transported somewhere else, our hearts lifted up off the ground and soaring. A taste of heaven. An encounter with the divine. A bigger picture of our earthly lives experienced from above, looking down, gliding, hearts swelling as the Spirit's breeze lifts our wings. Oh, for a taste of heaven.

It can happen, but to be honest it doesn't happen every week, even once a month or year. It may never happen or happen just once. Actually if it does happen you are never quite the same again. You have tasted something that you will then yearn for all your days.

Something happened to our friend the prophet Isaiah in the year that King Uzziah died – something like 740-735 BC. He went to church as he regularly did - well, to the Temple as it was called then – and what had been probably for years a matter of duty and routine became a moment of Epiphany. Perhaps there was natural explanation to this; perhaps he was in a borderline psychological moment, perhaps he was somehow on the edge, perhaps someone had put something into the incense – if they did, I'd like some of that please Mr Sacristan.

Isaiah was probably a priest; that's why he was in the temple. Like Zechariah the father of John the Baptist it was his turn on the rota to offer the morning and evening sacrifice. We can even time when this happened because live coals from the altar of sacrifice that stood in the temple courts in front of the gates to the house of God the central Temple building where only the priests entered – live coals were taken at the end of the morning or evening sacrifice and used on the altar of incense inside the holy place and before the entrance into the Holy of Holies where the throne of God was. This came at the end of the sacrifice because sin was now forgiven and cleansed the priest could offer incense and then give the priestly blessing to the people. So there was nothing unusual about seeing alive coal moved with a pair of tongs, there was nothing unusual about there being a divine throne, there was nothing unusual about the presence of a seraph; we know that at this time the seraph on a pole from the Wilderness period was placed in the Temple. A seraph was a winged serpent, otherwise known in our tradition as a dragon. It literally means 'blazing one' or 'fiery one' – think of a dragon breathing out fire.

What is different in that the whole scene comes alive, like the occupants of Christopher Robin's bedroom do in the opening scene of the Disney version of Winnie the Pooh. The stuffed donkey becomes a living, breathing, talking, complaining donkey; the wings of the bronze serpent-dragon begin to flap and it takes off and is joined by companions. The fire – and there was a fire on the altar of incense and there were lights on the seven-branched candlestand - doesn't just reflect off them but comes out of them. The building begins to shake – perhaps there was an earthquake or perhaps it's all part of the visionary experience. And instead of a temple servant bringing the live coal in his tongs, it's one of the seraphs. That coal brought from the altar of sacrifice speaks of the forgiveness of sins and the seraph touched the prophet's lips and gives an absolution:

Now this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.

Absolution is necessary because the prophet's vision first of makes him aware that he is in need of forgiveness:

Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips.

I don't think this is just a general act of humility before the divine presence; I think this is a moment of conversion every bit as significant as that experienced by Saul of Tarsus when he had a vision and heard a voice 800 years later on the road to Damascus. In some ways it was also a bit like Martin

Luther's another 1500 years later. Isaiah was a priest, a part of the religious establishment. His conversion would lead him to become a religious reformer and a prophet. He would come to see that some of the trappings of the Temple around him was leading his people into idolatry. Among those objects was the bronze serpent itself. The final king of Isaiah's ministry, the one he looked forward to and he saw as Emmanuel, and the one who most heeded his teachings was King Hezekiah. The second book of Kings tells us that when he came to the throne (ca 715BC, perhaps 20 years later) he 'broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it.' (2 Kings 18.4).

It is jumping ahead a bit but the calling to Isaiah was to preach to his people but his preaching for twenty years would be to no avail because they would never listen:

Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking but do not understand.

You may recall that Jesus quotes from Isaiah here when he explains why he teaches in parables. We tend to think Jesus taught in parables to make it easier for us to understand, but Jesus actually said he taught in parables so that people wouldn't understand – at least not yet. They would only understand years later when they remembered them and saw how they were fulfilled in his ministry and in the events that were to happen, some of them decades later. It was the same for Isaiah. His teaching was only understood years later; only when what he said came to be, and people saw what he said made sense of everything.

How long, O Lord.

When will they understand, what is this all pointing to?

Until cities lie waste and without inhabitant, and houses without people and the land is utterly desolate.

This is what happened during the reign of Hezekiah when Sennacherib and his Assyrian army swept through the cities of Judah and conquered them all so that only Jerusalem was left and then he besieged Jerusalem. That is an astonishing story of salvation - but a story that must wait for another day.

Back to the beginning, to the priest Isaiah ministering in his temple, to the day, the astonishing day when the curtains in the Temple drew back and when upon the empty throne in the Holy of Holies he saw the Lord, high and lifted up. He gives us no description of the Lord he saw – only his loftiness and his robe - it is a priestly robe, the word used of Aaron's robe – so this is a priest king. I wonder if he was given a vision of that later priest king, our Lord Jesus Christ. For until the coming of Jesus there was no way to see God. It was the great Jewish vocation to worship a God beyond seeing and beyond imagining. Every other Temple in the ancient world would have an image of its god enthroned in the holy of holies; the Jewish Temple looked like any other temple; it had the same layout, the same rooms, the same sanctuary and holy of holies and the same sort of decorations – cherubim and palms and altars and curtains and gold and flames. It even had the same sort of divine throne in the holy of holies. The one difference was that instead of a divine image was an empty space, because the Jews have taught us that the divine is beyond imagining, beyond words, beyond our small conceptions. Although Isaiah says he saw the Lord he doesn't – perhaps cannot – tell us what he saw. Perhaps his prophecies of a future king are his way of telling us what we need to know, what we can know: that whatever he saw would become known in the future, would be revealed when a child is born.

Today we are keeping Dedication Sunday, giving thanks for this place, this our temple (In inverted commas). Like Isaiah's it has a long history and its furnishings have sometimes pointed people towards the God we worship and sometimes perhaps have led them astray. We come here not to honour what we can see but so that what we can see draws us to worship the one we can't see, who

is above it all. A church and its furnishings are like the cherubim and the altars and gates and like the robe – they adorn but are there to draw us to what is beyond our craftsmanship and beyond our imagining. For Isaiah that one day in the year that King Uzziah died became a gateway to heaven because the liturgy and ornaments of his house of prayer took wings – literally – and took him to a place that changed not only his life, or his nations, but ultimately all of our lives and is why we are here this morning trying to learn to fly.