



The Round Church at  
**St Andrew the Great**  
Cambridge

A Sermon Preached  
on Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> December 2005  
by Mark Ashton

10p

Isaiah chapter 6:1-13

**Touched by God, Sent by God**

**Introduction: Now we're getting personal...**

Most of the Bible is addressed to us in the plural. It uses 'You' plural, ('Vous' as it would be in French), rather than 'you' singular, ('tu' in French, or 'Thee' and 'Thou' in older English). It speaks collectively to the people of God, or to the church, or even to the whole human race. In our more individualistic age, we apply its truths to each of us individually; and I believe we are right to do so. God deals with each of us separately. But that is always a rather unnerving thought.

Because there is strength in numbers, isn't there? A certain comfort in being one of the crowd, even a guilty crowd. There's a welcome anonymity. I was once in a school assembly, which was being addressed by a visiting speaker. And, as he spoke, some of the boys were catching beams of sunlight on the faces of their wristwatches and reflecting them up onto the ceiling above his head, where they created a sort of inter-galactic star wars effect of warring space ships, greatly to the amusement of the rest of the school. The speaker had no idea why his talk was generating such interest and merriment. At the end, after the departure of the distinguished visitor and senior teachers, the teacher in charge asked the boys responsible to own up. Safely hidden as they thought in the anonymity of the assembly, they would not do so. So the teacher asked the whole assembly to wait until they did. Now, unknown to them, the teacher had already identified the culprits. (He'd seen a flash cross the back of a boy in the row in front). And so then, over the next ten minutes, that teacher paced up and down the central aisle and gradually released the school, row by row, picking apparently randomly first one row and then another to leave. And at the end of ten minutes there was only the guilty row left, by this stage completely unnerved by his apparently supernatural powers of detection. Appropriate punishment followed of course, but the detection process had already almost been punishment enough.

We do not like being picked out, do we? Especially if we are guilty. I don't like the finger pointing at me specifically. But at this point in the Book of Isaiah, it moves from denouncing the sins of all the people (as we saw last week in chapter 5, and chapter 1 the week before) to something much more personal, unnervingly personal, as we shall see.

**1) Sin faced up to**

(vv 1-5)

*In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple* (v 1). That was about 740BC. And the death of a king always provoked a political crisis in those days, until a successor was safely installed on the throne. But Isaiah's vision told him that the throne was not actually empty. It was occupied by the Lord God, and the temple was full of His glory. There was no crisis. God was in control.

*Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying* (v 2). The seraphim are literally the 'fiery ones'. We are not meant to try to draw them. They emphasise the holiness of God, in Whose presence even the dazzling and the sinless are overwhelmed, fit neither to see God (*With two wings they covered their faces*), nor to be seen by God (*with two they covered their feet*), yet swift to serve God (*with two they were flying*), and tireless to praise Him: *And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory"* (v 3). Not "love, love, love", but "*Holy, holy, holy*". *At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke* (v 4). The human trappings of religion cannot contain a personal encounter with the reality of God like this. The temple was shaken as though in an earthquake. All my own ideas about God get thrown about and changed. See what it meant for Isaiah in

verse 5: ***“Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.”***

Notice what sight caused this realisation in the prophet: it was not the sight of his own sin, nor was it the sight of the terrible state of the world around. It was not even contemplating God’s law, and how he had broken it. No, ***my eyes have seen the King... it was: the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple.*** The Seraphim called, ***“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty”***, and Isaiah responded ***“Unclean, unclean!”*** We do not look inside ourselves to see the truth about ourselves. We look at God. Have we done that? Up until this moment it may be that Isaiah had seen himself as part of the solution: now he realised he was part of the problem.

You may remember there was a correspondence in ‘The Times’ newspaper on the topic: “What is wrong with the world?” and the shortest contribution just said this: ‘Dear Sir, I am. Yours faithfully, G K Chesterton.’ You may well have heard about that letter before, but has its truth dawned on us? Have we realised that? I am what is wrong with the world. And when I look at God, I realise that. It is so easy for us at Christmas to find ourselves tut-tutting at the commercialisation of the season. But I need to realise that it is my own greed and self-indulgence that are being reflected back to me out there in Cambridge. I live in a society to a large extent of my own making, far, far from the will of God. ***“Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty”*** (v 5). But, when sin is owned up to by an individual, then that individual’s sin can be dealt with.

## **2) Sin dealt with**

(vv 6-8)

***Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for”*** (vv 6-7). We think we have to go on a long, hard search if we are going to find God, and make sense of religion. Actually God flies to us—once we see ourselves as we really are, and we see Him as He really is, and we cry out for mercy. If we would meet God, one ounce of confession is worth a ton of theological speculation. Try it—you’ll see: stop speculating, ideas, debate, argument, intellectual conviction—try confession instead, and see if God does not hasten to make Himself real and deal with your sin.

***Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar*** (v 6). In the darkened, shaking, smoke-filled temple, this fiery messenger and the burning coal he brought must have seemed to Isaiah to be the coming of judgement, not salvation. Spooky, if not downright terrifying. But they came from the place of sacrifice, and they spoke the language of atonement. The altar was the place that God had appointed for animals to be sacrificed in the place of people. They died instead of the people dying for their own sins.

And, of course, the Bible does not deal in dumb signs for us to puzzle over—images and symbols which one person can take in one way and somebody else in quite another. Biblical faith is not like that because the Bible provides explanation; so verse 7: ***With it he touched my mouth and said, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for”*** (v 7). Isaiah had been convicted about his speech—***I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty”*** (v 5). And God’s forgiveness was applied to his mouth: ***With it he touched my mouth and said, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for”*** (v 7). There is no sin God cannot deal with. He reaches into your life and mine to deal with our worst sin, the ones we dare not even name to ourselves, let alone to others. That sin which I am aware of now and which I would least like paraded in front of you all on those screens. He reaches out to deal with that—and bring forgiveness.

There is a wonderful progression in this chapter: Isaiah sees God’s holiness and it makes him aware of his sin; but, as he confesses his sin, he is forgiven (Have we got that far?); then, with forgiveness, he receives a commission: ***Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I. Send me!”*** (v 8). The Lord, high and exalted, and surrounded by seraphim to do His will, nevertheless chooses to send a man as His messenger. And Isaiah’s response was magnificent: ***Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I. Send me!”*** (v 8). Do you remember Moses when God’s call came to him? “Here am I!—send my brother”. Or Jeremiah “Here am I!—send me later...when I’ve grown up a bit”. But Isaiah: ***“Here am I. Send me!”***

And then comes the great surprise of the chapter.

**3) Sent to fail**

(vv 9-13)

*He said, “Go and tell this people: ‘Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.’ 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”* (vv 9-10). There’s a bleak job description for you! And what is an even greater surprise is that this is the part of the chapter which gets most quoted in the New Testament. In each of the 4 gospels, in the Acts of the Apostles, in Paul’s letter to the Romans, this ‘decree of hardening’ (as it is called) is quoted about the good news of the kingdom of God as preached by Jesus and His disciples; because the gospel, which saves those who respond to it by putting their trust in Jesus, is also the gospel which judges those who reject it. It provides the opportunity for salvation or condemnation. That lovely possibility at the end of verse 10—to **turn and be healed**—only makes the alternative of rejection more dreadful.

No wonder Isaiah cried out: *Then I said, “For how long, O Lord?” And he answered: “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. And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste. But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land”* (vv 11-13). There is hope in that final image: *But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land”* (v 13b,c). All the judgement of verses 11 and 12 would clear the ground for new growth. Like a rosebush pruned right down by an expert (far further than you or I would dare to prune it), which, sure enough, shoots again, and far better than before.

But what are we to learn from this? Well consider this: what is it that most puts us as 21<sup>st</sup> century believers (if that is what we are) off from telling other people about God? Is it fear of what people will think of us? Is it a lack of love for Jesus and our non-Christian friends? Is it that we are not clear about the gospel? Or that we do not know how to do it, what to say to people? There may be some truth in all of those. But what about the certainty of failure? The

certainty of failure: is not that the most off-putting thing of all? That we know we will fail. And Isaiah is saying to us: “But who said anything about success?”

He was not being called to a successful ministry. He was being called to a faithful ministry—to tell people what God had told him; and to leave the result to God. The reason I find it hard to share Jesus with others is that I know they won’t respond. They won’t turn and be healed. But God says, “You leave that to Me”. I have a mother lying very close to death...she lost consciousness this week—I’ve tried to be faithful in explaining the gospel to her, but have I been successful? And Isaiah says to me, “Who said anything about success, Mark?” “Be faithful; leave the rest to God”.

Well, actually as we read on in the Bible (and the Bible keeps telling us to do just that: to Read on!), there is an answer to Isaiah’s question, because that **holy seed** would come, 7 centuries later, and His word to us was to **“Go and make disciples of all nations”**—not “go and try to make...” or even “go and fail to make...” But to **“Go and make...”** And it has happened. This gathering is an evidence of that. Look around. But you and I cannot take the credit. There may be one or two people here we’ve helped. But I couldn’t claim to have brought this gathering about. No man or woman has done that. It is the gospel. The gospel works. But gospel ministry doesn’t—not in the sense that it brings success to those who do it. We speak, because God has spoken. But it is His word that will do the work—and in His own way. Not a way that will bring us glory or success or achievement; but it will bring Him glory: As it continues to reach out and touch people in Cambridge this very week (and I have heard of one, and there’ve probably been others), just as God reached out His hand to touch Isaiah individually all those centuries ago in the temple in Jerusalem: ***In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple*** (v 1).

*(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)*