Sermon for 5th in Ordinary Year C

Readings: Isaiah 6:1-8; 1 Corinthians 15: 1-11; Luke 5:1-11

i

Visions of God if you’re walking through the temple, or a poor catch if you’re a fisherman, or members of the congregation who make up their own version of the Gospel like those wanting to deny the resurrection in Corinth if you’re a minister, could all be seen as ordinary occupational hazards. But for Isaiah, a member of the royal household, Peter the fisherman and Paul the evangelist there was much more at stake than a bad day at the office. They were epiphany moments; they were moments of great challenge; in Isaiah and Peter’s cases, they were life-changing moments.

Isaiah just happened to be in the temple one day. His visionary experience was a terrifying sight for him. We all sing hymns about seeing God, but we don’t expect it to happen on some ordinary day when we’re about our daily work. Even priests and ministers don’t expect face-to-face encounters with the Almighty this side of eternity.

However extraordinary Isaiah’s story strikes us to be, it bears the marks typical of such revelatory experiences down the ages. Isaiah’s instinctive reaction is to be acutely and instantly aware of God’s holiness, God’s absolute purity and God’s incomprehensible majesty. “Holy, holy, holy,” breathes Isaiah.

The corollary to that initial confrontation with absolute holiness is the instantaneous feeling of inadequacy, shame, impurity and mortality on the part of Isaiah. “There is no hope for me I am doomed,” is Isaiah’s fearful response.

Yet this is not the end. The angel brings burning coal not to destroy him, but to cleanse him and prepare him to fulfil his calling.

Peter’s reaction to Jesus follows the same path. “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man,” he says after his nets have been hauled up so full of fish that the catch nearly sank two boats, not just Peter’s.

Yet Jesus reassures Peter and commissions him in the same way as Isaiah received a commission. From now on, Peter would be catching people. Scholars tell us the verb “to catch” is an unusual word and is a word that is also used for taking prisoners in a war – which of course is a way of “capturing people” which preserves their life – because the alternative in war is to kill them. So Luke is trying to say that unlike fish which when caught are doomed to die – the people Peter will catch will be saved from death.

Paul’s letter to the Corinthians is some years after his dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus, but Paul’s reference to it here in 1 Corinthians 15 also speaks of his own sense of unworthiness to be called an Apostle as a former persecutor of the Church and his continuing sense of incredulity that Jesus should have chosen him.

Any would-be servant of the Lord who thinks he deserves the job is hardly one to be trusted.

ii

Another common feature in moments of divine Call is that God uses a person’s skills and experiences, but applies them in a new way or new setting and with extraordinary success.

This might suggest that God prepares those He is going to call before they even know it. Whilst still far from God, God may be preparing you for later service.

Isaiah is a member of the royal family. God uses Isaiah’s ready access to the kings, Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah in order to deliver his message. It is through Isaiah’s preaching that Hezekiah repents and leads the whole of Judah in an act of repentance as Sennacherib and the Assyrian army besiege the city. Judah is saved at the last minute through the king responding to Isaiah’s message and instead it is Sennacherib’s army that is destroyed by a visit from the angel of death – often assumed to have been an outbreak of dysentery or typhus.

God was able to use Isaiah’s social status to deliver his message. It was a difficult message to hear – that the city would be burnt down to a mere stump as a punishment for its sins, but would one day come back to new life when a new shoot from the stump of Jesse would appear. It is believed King Manasseh preferred not to hear such a message and had Isaiah put to death – according to tradition, by being sawn in two.

Peter’s unprecedented catch of fish on the lake prefigures the global reach of his later ministry. He captures for Christ not just the whole children of Israel when they are gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost, but also Cornelius the gentile and even leads the Christians into the very heart of the empire in Rome. Peter’s wonderful success, like Isaiah, resulted in his death by being crucified upside down on Vatican hill.

Paul too has been schooled at the feet of the great teacher, Gamaliel. He has been instructed to the highest level in Jewish scriptures and tradition. Yet instead of pursuing an academic career in Jerusalem, Jesus uses his academic talent to promote, defend and explain the Christian Gospel.

Instead of arguing about the tithing of cumin and mint, Paul lays the theological foundation for the New Covenant. Once again, despite his success, and probably because of it, Paul meets his end in Rome when he is beheaded outside the city walls.

iii

Now the fates of Isaiah, Peter and Paul might make you hope that God never calls you to do anything. Well fortunately, a grisly death is very much the exception rather than the rule. I also feel bold enough to suggest that if Isaiah, Peter and Paul had known where it would end, each of them would have trodden that path anyway.

In our Methodist history we have a tale of another unlikely hero. Wesley was an Oxford academic whose well-meaning venture to serve Christ in Georgia was a disappointing failure. So depressed was he upon his return from America that Wesley considered giving up his ministerial vocation altogether.

Wesley’s ministry at that time was metaphorically no healthier than a burnt stump. It was lifeless, hopeless and of no further use. Yet it blossomed again when a new shoot of life was granted on 25 May 1738 at Aldersgate Street when Wesley felt his heart strangely warmed.

Again, Wesley’s initial reaction is to experience his own sinfulness and then God’s amazing forgiveness, followed by a commission.

The heart of Wesley’s message is this: experience of God’s holiness is not just for the extraordinary historical heroes like Isaiah, Peter and Paul, but for everyone. A life-transforming encounter with the holiness of the living God is not just a special calling restricted to the Christian mystic, or the religious life of the monastery and convent, but is a real possibility for every ordinary believer that is prepared to dedicate themselves to the search for scriptural holiness.

Where Wesley had met with failure to make converts in the United States, now in England after Aldersgate, his nets quickly became so full that he had to enlist other helpers to bring in the catch.

I suppose one of the important things in each of these stories is that the truth of the message of salvation which they were called to preach had first to be experienced by the men themselves.

Isaiah didn’t just talk about the theory of God’s holiness and what it demanded of the people and the need for deep and sincere repentance, but he experienced that for himself. He could talk with conviction.

Peter didn’t just talk about spreading the Gospel and sharing the message with the world – he was able to do it in Jerusalem at Pentecost, in Caesarea at Cornelius’ house, and in Rome on Vatican Hill. He was able to do it rather than just talk about it because he had experienced what Christ had done for him on the lake that day and in many subsequent times and places.

Wesley’s poor harvest in Georgia turned into huge crowds in England because he experienced the salvation of which he had been speaking. He experienced God’s holiness not just from academic theory, but in his own heart. There is no substitute for experience and this experience is still possible for you today.

Perhaps God has already been preparing you for a future work. Perhaps your gifts are just what God can use like the young boy’s loaves and fish.

Well your encounter with the holiness of the living God, if you’ve not yet been through such a moment, might be around any corner – when walking through the temple one day as you’ve probably done many times before, like Isaiah had – or when having a bad day at work like Peter had one time – or when striving to do your best to dismiss all this Christian nonsense like Paul was up to on his way to Damascus.

It might be a bit scary at the time. You might wonder what it’s all about. Or it might just creep up on you one day when at the Church Bible study like it did for Wesley. But dramatic or not – once you realise you’ve been touched by the burning coals of God’s holy presence your life will never be the same again.

Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard

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