

St John's Sunday service for 6th September 2020

Hello everyone and welcome to worship with St John's Church.

We gather from many different places this morning, including, for the first time in over five months, a small number in our church building (this same service will be used in the church building too). As the doors open once again this is our prayer. 'Father God, fill this place, with your love, with your grace. As we call on your name, visit us in power again'. We pray, Lord that you would continue to bind us together in your love, that we might worship together in Spirit and in Truth. Amen

As a new academic year has begun, and guidelines for our lives continue to shift and change, I believe it is vital that we bring our focus back again and again to our faithful and unchanging God, the one constant in this ever-changing world. This morning we are focussing on God's holiness and our response to it.

Ps 46:10 – Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth.

Song No eye has seen

No eye has seen and no ear has heard
And no mind has ever conceived
The glorious things that You have prepared
For every one who has believed
You brought us near and You called us Your own
And made us joint heirs with Your Son

*How high and how wide
How deep and how long
How sweet and how strong is Your love
How lavish Your grace
How faithful Your ways
How great is Your love, O Lord*

Objects of mercy who should have known wrath
We're filled with unspeakable joy
Riches of wisdom, unsearchable wealth
And the wonder of knowing Your voice
You are our treasure and our great reward
Our hope and our glorious King

Words and music by Mark Altrogge © 1990 Integrity's Praise! Music/Sovereign Grace Praise (BMI)

Prayer Lord God, your glory fills the heavens and the whole of creation speaks of your beauty and splendour. We join with all the hosts of heaven as we praise your holy name. As we worship you, heavenly Father, we stand in awe that you who are so mighty would stoop to care for each one of us and by your great mercy draw us to yourself. Before you we are as nothing and yet you call us to do your will, to show your greatness and your love to others, and by your truly amazing grace, wonderful Father, King of all kings, we are able to say, 'Here I am' – Lord, accept our praise as we come before you, humbled by your greatness and thankful for your love.
Lord, as we think of your holiness, your purity, we become aware of our own failures and we confess our sins to you now ...

For our foolishness and our thoughtless use of the gifts of your creation – Lord forgive us.
For our neglect of you, and our failure to care for others – Lord forgive us.
For our selfishness in prayer and our carelessness in worship – Lord forgive us.
For all those wrong things we have done believing no-one would notice - Lord forgive us.
Here is good news for all who put their trust in Christ. Jesus himself says, 'Your sins are forgiven' Thanks be to God. Amen.

Lord's prayer Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and for ever. Amen

Reading Isaiah 6:1-8

6 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. 2 Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. 3 And they were calling to one another:

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty;
the whole earth is full of his glory."

4 At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

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."

6 Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. 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."

8 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!"

Reflection

Isaiah lived in Jerusalem in the 8th century BC. The people of Israel had enjoyed a time of security and prosperity in the first half of the century, but the fact that they had turned away from God meant that this was soon to change. The events in the passage we have just heard take place in the year of King Uzziah's death which is generally thought to have been around 740 BC. At this time Isaiah is thought to have been established as a scribe in the royal palace in Jerusalem, but God has other plans for his servant.

While still a young man, Isaiah receives a vision in the Temple which is to change the course of his life. He sees God himself, truly holy, surrounded with majesty and worshipped by adoring angels. It was an unforgettable sight which was to motivate him for many, many years to come. We might expect his reaction to be one of joy and wonder, but this is not immediately the case. In this context, seeing the Lord and listening to the praise of the angels, Isaiah is overwhelmed by a sense of his own sinfulness and that of his nation, and he cries, 'Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips'. He feels unfit to be in God's presence. I would too because we can't hide anything from God, and compared with him in his dazzling perfection, we are all dreadful sinners - unclean to use Isaiah's words. And yet it can be tempting when we do something wrong to think, 'It's not that bad', and 'everybody does it', or 'what the eyes don't see can't hurt'. But God's eyes see everything, and our sin is

measured against his purity, not by comparison with others.

The 'unclean lips' Isaiah speaks of are caused by an unclean heart (we think here of Jesus' words in Mark 7:20-22, 'What comes out of a man is what makes him unclean. For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts...' and so on) and in his anguish, Isaiah cries out to God for inner cleansing. God responds to his need instantly. His lips are touched with a live burning coal, and he is told that his sins are forgiven. He is cleansed, not by his own efforts, but purely by the grace of God. I find this very reassuring and encouraging – although in the light of God's presence we become painfully aware of our failings, his response is not one of condemnation and rejection but of compassion and love, and a desire to cleanse and forgive us.

When Isaiah had been cleansed and forgiven, he was able to hear the Lord's call for someone to deliver his message of justice and mercy to the sinful people of Israel.

'Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?' His response was an immediate willingness to be used in God's service no matter what the cost. He did not ask what the conditions were but simply said, 'Here am I. Send me!' It's not easy to be like Isaiah is it? We are asked to do something and our immediate response is often along the lines of, 'Oh, I'm too busy', or 'Someone else could do it better'. 'I'm too old - or too young - God wouldn't be calling me'.

'Here am I. Send me!' No mention of, 'I might not be able to do it, 'I don't really know what I'm expected to do', or 'What will people think of me!'

We often hold back when we are called to do something for all sorts of reasons, but when God calls us to do something, we have to trust his choice, and we have to trust him to enable and equip us. We don't need to worry about whether we are suited to or capable of, a particular task and must never underestimate what God can achieve with one willing worker, when we put ourselves entirely in His hands.

I think the only condition we can justify when we answer God's calling is to say, 'Yes Lord I will go, if you lead me'.

In Isaiah's case, before he could be used by God to call the people back to holy living, he himself had to be cleansed and prepared for holy service. Before we accept God's call to speak for him to those around us, we must be cleansed as Isaiah was, confessing our sins and submitting to God's control. Letting God purify us may be painful - hopefully not like having burning coals touching our lips, but all the same it is often very hard for us to admit our faults and to see that we need to change. We need to open our hearts and respond to what God is trying to do through the work of His Spirit. Isaiah's encounter with God permanently affected his character so that he reflected the God he represented. This can be the same for us too!

When Isaiah said, 'Here am I. Send me!', this was not to be a one-off venture to speak to the people, but the start of a ministry that was to last about half a century! It was important that he had an indelible vision of the Lord in all his holiness for his mission was to speak to a people of unclean lips and hardened hearts – it was certainly not an easy task and would require unwavering commitment in the face of indifference and opposition. When we answer God's call on our lives, we must be prepared to make a lasting commitment to his work, often speaking to 'people of unclean lips and hardened hearts'. The only way we can be strengthened to do that is to keep very clear in our minds and hearts that vision of our mighty God in all his splendour. This will remind us of our need for God's constant cleansing and renewing, and will also, surely, trigger a response of worship and a genuine desire to serve him.

Central to everything we try to do is this need to be in God's presence where we can be

prepared, instructed and empowered to do His will. So often we are so busy rushing around trying to please God that we leave no time to actually be with Him, aware of Him, aware of what He wants us to do, and aware of His love for us and ours for Him. Although we may not all receive such a dramatic and wonderful experience as Isaiah's vision of God in the temple, there are many ways we can try and visualise God and become more aware of his presence. We experience him all around us in creation and there are times when our hearts are triggered to spontaneous praise – by a beautiful sunset, a favourite view, perhaps the sight of a newborn baby – and we experience Him in the lives of the people we meet. Sometimes we reach out to Him using pictures from the Bible such as the one Isaiah paints so beautifully for us here, or as in Psalm 46 verse 10 we can simply be still and know that He is God.

However we achieve it, the important fact is that we take time out just for God, free from distraction so that we can work on getting to know him in the way he knows us. If we feel unworthy of being in his presence in such an intimate way then we are reminded that 'all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. It is only through God's amazing grace and his love for each one of us that he sent his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. God loves us and longs for us to come close to him and to receive the forgiveness and new life he longs to give us.

In order for us to live and work as Christians in this world, we need to discover and keep discovering God's holiness. Our daily frustrations, society's pressures, and our own shortcomings reduce and narrow our view of God. We need to remind ourselves of the view of God we find in the Bible – mysterious, awesome, really beyond our imagining, and yet powerful and compassionate – able to help us to deal with all our problems and concerns. If we spend 'quality' time in God's presence we will find ourselves free and empowered, energised to worship and to serve Him, to hear Him calling us and to respond without hesitation, 'Here am I, send me!'

Meditation Picturing God

Almighty God, you are awesome.

I sit at your feet and try to summon a picture of you,

To feel what you are like.

And then I hear your laughter in the song of a bird in springtime,

Feel the caress of your fingers in a warm summer breeze.

I am dazzled by your beauty as I gaze at the sun setting over the sea

And feel your love in the comforting smile of an old friend.

I look from the intricacies of a spider's web to the vastness of the oceans

And find your dimensions breathtaking.

I feel your sense of purpose as the seasons change,

As youth turns to old age,

As your creation strives for perfection – strives to mirror its creator,

And I love you....

You call to us through Scripture,

I'm your friend, redeemer, King.. Come to me....'

Your voice on the wind shouts through the centuries,

'I made you and I love you',

and in the dark thundery skies I see your iron resolution which will never let us go.

Loving God, we want to know more of you.

Help us as we try to reflect you in our lives so that others can know you too.

And now we lift to God our concerns for ourselves and for others, recognising that you, Lord are here with us, and attentive to our deepest needs.

Lord, we long for our Church to be alive and active, attentive to you, and ready to go wherever you suggest. Show us the work of the Church from your point of view, and develop our will to co-operate. As we take these first steps in re-opening our building, we ask that you would keep us focussed on you and on your mission in the world. We thank you that wherever we are at this moment, your Holy Spirit is with us, binding us together into one church with faith in one Lord and Saviour.

Lord in your mercy **hear our prayer**

Lord, we long for your kingdom to come in our world, and to flood with truth and love, the disillusion, hopelessness and terror which traps the human spirit and chokes its potential joy.

Lord in your mercy **hear our prayer**

Lord, come into the daily relationships we so easily take for granted, and enable us to value one another, delighting in one another's richness, and responding to one another's needs with love.

Lord in your mercy **hear our prayer**

Lord, as the new academic year begins, we pray that you would watch over schools, colleges and universities. We pray that those involved in teaching and supporting might not feel overwhelmed by additional responsibilities and that youngsters returning to, or even just beginning their education might feel secure in their environment and eager to learn.

Lord in your mercy **hear our prayer**

Lord, you know the need and pain of those we love and care for and we name them before you now in a few quiet moments.... As you look after them, give them the sense of your caring presence to uphold and sustain them.

Lord in your mercy **hear our prayer**

Lord, for us death can seem so cruel and we pause to lift to you those who are grieving - give us a better understanding of eternity that will comfort our hearts, and gather into your kingdom all those whose earthly journey has come to an end.

Lord in your mercy **hear our prayer**

Thank you, Lord of hope, for the way you surprise us with joy, and show us the extraordinary and the wonderful in the ordinary things of life.

Merciful Father, accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Amen

I can't be sure just how you have pictured God today, but I pray that your response to that experience will be one of praise and a longing to follow Jesus as we look to the eternal future he has planned for all who turn to him.

Song There is a hope that burns within my heart StF 2558

There is a hope that burns within my heart,
That gives me strength for every passing day;

A glimpse of glory now revealed in meagre part,
Yet drives all doubt away:
I stand in Christ, with sins forgiven;
And Christ in me, the hope of heaven!
My highest calling and my deepest joy,
To make His will my home.

There is a hope that lifts my weary head,
A consolation strong against despair,
That when the world has plunged me in its deepest pit,
I find the Saviour there!
Through present sufferings, future's fear,
He whispers 'courage 'in my ear.
For I am safe in everlasting arms,
And they will lead me home.

There is a hope that stands the test of time,
That lifts my eyes beyond the beckoning grave,
To see the matchless beauty of a day divine
When I behold His face!
When sufferings cease and sorrows die,
And every longing satisfied.
Then joy unspeakable will flood my soul,
For I am truly home.

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Blessing Father we thank you that although you are so great that you are beyond our understanding, we know that you love each one of us and you want us to be close to you – help us to keep alive a vision of you that will encourage us to live and work to your praise and glory. And the blessing of Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with you all and give you peace, now and always. **Amen**