

Address by Nigel Guthrie for 6 February 2022

Isaiah the son of Amoz was giving his message to the people of Judah and Jerusalem in the second half of the eighth century BC. In that period the northern Hebrew tribes were annexed to Assyria and it was the southern tribes whose life and religious practices are scrutinized in the visions and prophecies of Isaiah which are recorded in the first 39 chapters of our book of Isaiah. Isaiah holds in tension a vision of peace and justice against the reality of idolatry and haughty people who crush and grind the face of the poor, as he puts it. Tragically his prophecies still resonate strongly amongst the violence, injustice and poverty of our own world.

In chapter 5, just before the vision we heard today, we read the parable of the vineyard which God allows to be destroyed. It was a prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of her people to Babylon. And why did God allow this? Isaiah gives this terse explanation of why God was so angry with Israel and Judah, “he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!”

It’s surprising that the vision which was described in today’s reading doesn’t come at the beginning of the book. But perhaps this vision was a renewing force of God in Isaiah’s life rather than an initial calling? It describes a vision of God in the setting of the Jerusalem temple. But it is anything but business as usual in the temple as Isaiah describes six winged seraphs calling out ‘Holy, holy, holy’: the basis of the hymn we call the Sanctus, which we say or sing at every celebration of Holy Communion. The shaking of the temple and the smoke seems to represent the shaking of Isaiah’s soul and even perhaps the shaking of the foundations of the Hebrew people. Then there is the symbol of purification, a live coal from the altar touching his lips and bringing an assurance of forgiveness. Then, finally, the voice of God not giving a command, but asking a question “Whom shall I send and who will go for us”?

It is a question which each of us faces when we come before God. This is why prayer is so often an uncomfortable experience! To pray for an individual poses the question, ‘what can I do for them?’. To pray for a situation or organisation poses the question ‘what can I do to improve things?’ To pray for the poor and suffering poses the question ‘how can I help to alleviate their needs?’. But prayer should not lead us into an unending guilt trip. That was surely the meaning of the coal touching Isaiah’s lips – the seraph told Isaiah “your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” It was not that Isaiah had sorted out the iniquity of the people. But he was being

prepared to answer a call not to stand by while injustice and idolatry continued to blight his society.

In church we try to work together for common goals: to promote peace, justice and the integrity of creation. St Paul shows us how profoundly we need each other if we are to serve and worship God. And the disciples were a body of twelve – not a lot of people to bring in the Kingdom of God - and not always the best in attitude or understanding, but were called and chosen by Jesus. Our calling is individual but it is also corporate and although our own conscience must be alert and responsive to injustice so should our structures in church and society.

It is intriguing that Isaiah locates his great vision as being “in the year that King Uzziah died.” Was the King’s death in some way connected with the vision? Did it bring about an instability or crisis which provoked the vision?

It was the death of King George the sixth 70 years ago that brought his daughter Princess Elizabeth back from her visit to Kenya to take up the responsibility of being our Queen. We know that she shared a close and loving relationship with him so this has always been a quiet time of commemoration for Her Majesty. We hope that she will be in good health to enjoy some more exuberant celebrations later in the year.

Reflecting on her calling this week, I have been thinking how much of our lives are determined by factors outside our control. The abdication of her uncle and the relatively early death of her father and the fact that she was the elder of two sisters were the realities that constituted her calling as monarch 70 years ago. And those of us who do not agree with a constitutional monarchy will find that especially weird. But in reality a lot of our callings are determined in similar ways. The life and work of our parents, our education and early experience, our particular strengths and weaknesses, our singleness, partnership or marriage and our faith all profoundly affect our calling, or callings in life. Few of us have had such dramatic calls to service as Isaiah, and yet I suspect that many of us have had moments of revelation or decision where the course of our lives has been changed significantly. As Christians we look for the hand of God in this and indeed seek his words of inspiration and guidance as we look to clarify and follow our own calling. And as we age we realise that our calling changes as our circumstances change. As we leave youth behind we can accept commitment and responsibilities. As we finish paid employment we may

have more time to give to voluntary roles. As our children leave home perhaps we can use the space for new forms of service? As we become less physically able we can dedicate ourselves to friendship and to prayer.

Queen Elizabeth has adapted from being a popular young monarch travelling the world to being a relatively frail ninety-five year old mainly living quietly at home. But in her unwavering love for God and for her people in times of joy and sorrow, she continues to be a powerful example of Christian life and service which resonates with many around the world. We give thanks for her faithful service today and pray that in our own way each of us will say 'yes' to God's call in our lives.