

## CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE HOLY KIND

### Isaiah 6

Over the next few weeks we're going to look at some exceptional visions which we find in the Bible. The first one is Isaiah chapter 6. It's a chapter that takes us into a different world. Isaiah sets the scene in the very first words: 'In the year that King Uzziah died'.

The stories in the Bible are not fairy stories. They're real history, and the prophets took great care to give precise dates of when they were writing and what was happening. So it's not unusual to find references to the king who was in power at the time but this is the only occasion when something is linked to the death of a king.

Details of Uzziah's reign are given in 2 Chronicles chapter 26. In verses 3 to 5 we read, 'Uzziah was sixteen years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem fifty-two years. ... He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, just as his father Amaziah had done. He sought God during the days of Zechariah, who instructed him in the fear of God. As long as he sought the LORD, God gave him success.'

There's something about that last line that sounds a bit ominous and sure enough as we read on we come to verses 15 and 16. 'His fame spread far and wide, for he was greatly helped until he became powerful. But after Uzziah became powerful, his pride led to his downfall. He was unfaithful to the LORD his God.'

He went into the temple and tried to do what only the priests were allowed to do but they stopped him. Verse 19 says, 'While he was raging at the priests in their presence before the incense altar in the LORD's temple, leprosy broke out on his forehead.' Verse 21 says, 'King Uzziah had leprosy until the day he died. He lived in a separate house – leprous and excluded from the temple of the LORD.'

That's the story of Uzziah, a great king, who made a great start, and had a great reign, only to falter at the end through pride. In this chapter we read one other significant fact about Uzziah. Verse 26: 'The other events of Uzziah's reign, from beginning to end, are recorded by the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz.'

Now do you see the significance of that opening line in Isaiah chapter 6? 'In the year that King Uzziah died...'

Isaiah was no country bumpkin. He was an official royal biographer. He had access to the palace. He was close to the king. The terrible tragedy of King Uzziah's final days were somehow a reflection of the moral decay in the nation. It was like a microcosm of Israel's history. It had all started so well but decay had set in, corruption, pride, and in the end too much to be ashamed of.

Against that backdrop of human failure ending in death Isaiah had a vision of the living God. 'In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne.' We're meant to see the contrast between the king in the grave and the king on the throne, the human king and the heavenly king, the king who had fallen and the king who was high and lifted up. The vision of God in all his sovereign power was deliberately set against the demise of Uzziah in all his shameful pride.

In this description of his vision I get the feeling that Isaiah is trying to describe the indescribable. He sees the Lord, sovereign in power. He is seated on a throne; so he is the rightful king. He is high and exalted. 'High' describes what he is in the greatness of his majesty. 'Lifted up' suggests the honour and praise that is his due.

'The train of his robe filled the temple.' For the first time it becomes clear that Isaiah was not encountering this kingly presence in a palace but in a temple, the place of

sacrifice, the place where innocent blood was shed to make atonement for sin. That is the only basis on which we can meet God.

A number of modern translations simply say, 'His robe filled the temple' but it's the train of his robe. The New Revised Standard Version says, 'the *hem* of his robe filled the temple'. Isaiah does not describe the Lord. He can only hint at the extent of his glory. There was that about his presence that filled the temple, but it was only a small part of the trailing edge of his robe. That which filled Isaiah's vision was just a tiny part of the reality that was the Lord.

Isaiah goes on to describe the attendants of the heavenly King. They were seraphs. The Hebrew word means 'burning ones'. Each had six wings. With two wings they were covering their faces. They could not look on the divine glory. With two wings they were covering their feet. They did not want to draw attention to themselves. And with two wings they were flying. Unwilling to see or be seen but ready to serve.

The seraphs covered their eyes but not their lips. They were calling to one another. Verse 3: 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.' In the Hebrew language a double repetition is used as a superlative. For example, 'gold gold' means pure gold; 'peace peace' means perfect peace. This verse is unique not only in the Bible but in the Hebrew language, a triple repetition: holy, holy, holy. In his commentary Alec Motyer says, 'Holiness is supremely the truth about God, and his holiness is in itself so far beyond human thought that a "super-superlative" has to be invented to express it.'

Not only is this a super-superlative. It is also a further evidence of the truth that emerges gradually in scripture, that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God in three persons, and that holiness is the hallmark of the Trinity.

God's mysterious and majestic holiness is now described not only in the temple but in the whole earth. 'The whole earth is full of his glory.'

In verse 4 our attention is drawn once more to what was happening in the temple. 'At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.' The mention of doorposts and thresholds shaking suggests that Isaiah was denied access to God. The temple was filled with smoke.

Two things keep recurring in this vision: fire and fullness. The seraphs flash like flames of fire. The temple is filled with smoke. In the Old Testament fire symbolises God's anger, his holiness. God is unapproachable. At the same time not only is the temple filled with smoke, the whole earth is full of his glory. God is inescapable. Here is the human dilemma. God is unapproachable and yet inescapable. We are drawn to him but it's like moths drawn to a flame.

As the reality of this hit the prophet Isaiah we hear him speak for the first time 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."

Isaiah became aware of his need. If you look at the preceding chapter, chapter 5, you will hear him condemning the people in God's name in a series of 'woes', condemning exploitation, decadence, deceit, pride, drunkenness and debauchery. 'Woe to those who call evil good and good evil' (verse 20). But now there's a change. 'Woe to me!' That's where revival begins, when we begin to acknowledge that the problem is not with *them*, it's with *me*.

As Isaiah came face to face with God's holiness he was immediately confronted with his own sinfulness. He was no better than the people around him. He was a sinner, a man of unclean lips living among a people of unclean lips. If you find yourself in condemnation mode you may well be justified. We live in a society marred by

godlessness, drunkenness, immorality and inequality, where the Ten Commandments are like a reverse image of what's happening. But revival can only come when our heart's cry is not 'woe to them' but 'woe to me'.

In verse 6 something terrifying happened. 'Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar.' Isaiah makes no attempt to describe what he felt at that moment. He goes straight on to say what happened next.

'With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.'" God's answer to Isaiah's need was matched to his exact need. The live coal touched his lips. His guilt was taken away. His sin was atoned for.

For a man who was familiar with the ritual of the Jerusalem temple this vision must have seemed inexplicable. There was no priest, no animal sacrifice, nothing prescribed by the law. He had nothing to bring and nothing was required. This cleansing from sin was on the basis of something beyond the law.

There was an altar but it was an empty altar. The fire of God's wrath had burned on that altar but the sacrifice was complete. Just a symbol of that sacrifice was brought to touch his lips. Just the word of forgiveness was enough to confirm his salvation.

God's salvation dealt with the sin he was most aware of. 'This has touched your lips.' But beyond that it dealt with the underlying mass of sin. 'Your guilt is taken away.' And God's word confirmed the means by which salvation had come. 'Your sin is atoned for.' Atonement means the payment of the price which justice requires. At this point Isaiah had no idea who had paid that price. He simply knew that the price had been paid. It is only much later, when we come to Isaiah chapter 53, that he makes the awful discovery that it was the sovereign king who dwells in unapproachable majesty who became the sacrificial lamb who paid the price to take away his sins, the sins of his people, the sins of the world.

The majesty of God's holiness. The mystery of God's salvation. The sovereign king. The sacrificial lamb. And God has given us a symbol. This has touched your lips. God has given us his word. Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.