

# ISAIAH'S COMMISSION

## ISAIAH 6:1-31

Isaiah and Jeremiah Series

### OPENING PRAYER

Grant, Lord God, as we approach the Scriptures, that we may have receptive hearts and seeking minds to discern your presence and your truth, in Jesus' name.

### EXEGESIS

Isaiah lived in troubled times. Judea (the southern Hebrew kingdom) was a small nation caught up in the perpetual struggle for power and dominion in the Middle East. They were, however, a proud and independent people. The Temple in Jerusalem was the symbolic focus of their loyalty to Yahweh (the Lord), the God with whom they had a covenant. The perennial problem was how to preserve independence and identity in the face of the pressures of the imperial bullies such as Egypt, Assyria and Babylon. The result was a vacillation between submission (which meant religious apostasy) and defiance (which only brought more trouble).

Isaiah's prophetic ministry spanned three key points in this history. 1. Uzziah (783-742 BCE) oversaw a time of prosperity and expansion, with the restoration of the Temple, but his death brought a fresh time of uncertainty. 2. Uzziah's grandson Ahaz (735-715) had to make a decision: was he to join the resistance to expanding Assyria? Samaria (the northern Hebrew kingdom) and Syria tried to coerce him into an alliance. On Isaiah's advice, he refused (2 Kings 16). Samaria was destroyed (722) but Ahaz had to become a vassal to Assyria. 3. After a time of weakness, the Assyrians returned when Hezekiah, Ahaz's son, was king (715-687). This time the temptation was to ally with a reinvigorated Egypt. Once more Isaiah counsels caution: rely on God, not the warmongers. This time Jerusalem was besieged; but salvation came through the withdrawal of Sennacherib's army. Hezekiah stood firm and was justified.

Isaiah's vision (6.1-8). This seems to have come when his spiritual quest was awakened by Uzziah's death. God sits on the throne and the heavenly courtiers surround him, above the place in the Temple which was God's footstool.

Isaiah's message (i). 6. 9-13. The summary of his task is fearsome. It is to witness to a people's stubbornness and blindness. The prospect is tragedy. Yet there is also hope. The tree may be felled but new, healthy growth can come up from the stump. (ii). 31. This chapter comes from the time of Hezekiah when the Egyptians were trying to expand into Palestine. The seemingly invincible forces of the Egyptians were in fact only flesh and blood. Only God, claims Isaiah, is steadfast (31. 3-5). So he was able to make the astounding assertion that even mighty Assyria would fail.

## REFLECTION

(i). Isaiah's vision, 6. 1-8. This is a classic text from the Bible about an encounter with God (cf. Exodus 3. 1-6; Mark 9.2-8; Acts 26.12-18). Like so many such experiences it constitutes a call to service. There seem to be four elements: surprise, awe, obedience and a new direction. Look again at the text and identify the basic emotional and cognitive elements found there. Ask whether this has been in any way part of your own experience, however 'low-key' it might have been. Such moments can come at any time, unexpectedly. At the same time, they can be looked for and never come. The timing is in God's gift. Indeed, are such experiences necessary, do you think?

(ii). Resistance, 6. 9-13. Isaiah met resistance to his message. What do you think about the suggestion given to Isaiah that this will go on forever?

(iii). 31. This chapter suggests that it is necessary to discern what is 'faithful action' in the fast-changing events of history. In retrospect, it looks too easy, but even Isaiah must have had his doubts. Our age, too, is one of rapid political and economic, social and technological change. It is not easy to be wise and to discern the best way forward. What does it mean to trust God in such circumstances? Are there any markers or principles that should inform a Christian understanding of the situation? How easy is it to see how they can be worked out in the actuality of world events?

## CLOSING PRAYER

How can we pray for the world? How can we not look at the affairs of humankind without fear and despair? Because we have fear there is no love. Because we have despair there is no hope. Because there is no hope we do not trust in your ways.

Yet, despite all, we cling to Jesus. In Jesus we dare have hope. In Jesus we dare have love. In faith, hope and charity we can hold in our hearts the agony of the world; we can pray for all people; we can also give ourselves to our neighbours, offering the service it has been given us to do, here, in our time and place.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Walter Brueggemann: Isaiah 1-39 (Westminster John Knox Press, 1998)
- John Goldingay: Isaiah for Everyone (SPCK, 2013)