

Sunday 11th October 2009 Christ Church 10.45 am
Isaiah 6 – God is holy

Years ago my home church down in Ipswich had a Church Weekend away. It was a great weekend – as well as time to relax with each other we had a guest speaker who gave a series of Bible studies. Robert was a gifted Bible teacher, and over the weekend we grew to really appreciate his ability to unpack the Bible for us.

Sunday lunchtime the weather was glorious, so the men went out for a game of cricket. Robert came with us, so we let him go into bat first. He certainly didn't look the sporty type, but once he got the bat, nothing could shift him. It virtually ended up with him taking on our church single-handed! We'd known he was a great Bible teacher, but this was a side to him we had never suspected.

Maybe you've had an experience like that with someone – you thought you knew them, but then discovered that there were significant gaps in your knowledge. It happens in human relationships – and it definitely happens in our relationship with God.

Over the last 2 Sundays we've started looking at 'Knowing God.' 2 weeks ago – Back to Church Sunday – we saw that God is welcoming. Last week at harvest we were reminded that God is generous – *every good and perfect gift comes from above.*

And I guess that for most of us that is the God we know. But, of course, there is more to God than welcome and generosity – things which we maybe don't think so much about. But if we want to know God, we have to know him as he has revealed himself in the Bible, with all the different things that tells us. And this morning we are thinking about God being holy.

It is actually the word which the Bible applies to God more than any other word – God is holy; he is the Holy One. And yet I suspect that it isn't the first thing that we think of when we think of God. We think more of his love, of his grace, of his generosity maybe. That might be because 'holy' is not a word in common use – so we are less sure what it means when we say that God is holy.

Maybe one of the most famous places where God is called holy is Isaiah 6. So we are going to turn to that this morning to help us find out what it means to say that God is holy.

READING

It was one of those key moments in history – as King Uzziah died. He had reigned for 52 years, and was succeeded by his son Jotham. God’s people Judah felt secure – what could possibly go wrong? But one man was given a view of history from a different perspective. *In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of his robe filled the temple.* King Uzziah might have been sitting on the throne of Judah, but all along there had been another king, and even though Uzziah had died, this king was still seated on his throne.

And what a king. He is seated on a throne, he is high and lifted up, his royal robe filled the temple. And he was surrounded by seraphs – awesome angelic beings, who covered their faces and their feet, as signs of their humility before the king.

Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: Holy, holy, holy is the Lord almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.

Holy, holy, holy. It’s just about the only place in the Bible where this sort of expression occurs – each ‘holy’ intensifies the previous one – a bit like you might say ‘very very, very’. God isn’t just ‘holy’, he isn’t just ‘holy, holy’, or completely holy. He is ‘holy holy holy’ – so holy that language can’t really express it.

That doesn’t just mean that God is very, very, very good. I think that is one of the problems we have with the word holy. In common use someone might be called ‘holier than thou’ – meaning someone who makes a big issue of never doing anything wrong. We tend to think of holiness as being about goodness. Now, of course, God is good – perfectly good. But holiness isn’t first and foremost about being good – it is really about being separate. If God is holy, he is utterly separate.

Now that might sound like the old idea of a God who creates the world, and then withdraws and leaves the world to run on its own. But God’s separateness isn’t due to indifference. It isn’t because God and humanity are like oil and water and cannot mix. It is because God and sin cannot mix. In Isaiah 59 – *Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor his ear to dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God.* Or 1 John 1:5 *God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.* Where God is, darkness cannot exist. And where God is, sin cannot exist.

So, you see, God's holiness isn't just a definition of God's character, it's a real problem for us. God is completely separate from sin, and we are fallen people in a fallen world. Isaiah realised that. If God is utterly holy; if he is so separate from sin that sin cannot exist where he is, then to come into his presence is to face judgement. *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.*

I wonder – how often do we feel like that? Of course, we know that Jesus has died for us – that's what this communion service is about. We know that when we confess we can do so with complete confidence in God's endless forgiveness. That is all gloriously true – if it wasn't none of us would be here today. But I wonder if that might make us a bit blasé about our sin, and about the God's holiness.

For Isaiah, this vision of the Holy One shocked him into reality. And that paved the way for salvation. God's holiness means that he is utterly separate from sin. It means that as a sinner I can't stand before him. But instead of frying Isaiah – *Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongues from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, See, this has touched your lips, your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.*

Isaiah was forgiven. His sin was taken away, so that he could stand in God's presence. Of course, Isaiah couldn't have understood how that was possible – his sin could only be atoned for by Jesus' death. But the forgiveness was real.

At the time when the earthly king died, Isaiah had come face to face with the true king. And that meeting changed his life.

For Isaiah this amazing vision was to prepare him for God's call to be a prophet – *Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, Whom shall I send? And who will go for us? And I said, Here I am. Send me.* The king had called his servant, but what a strange job Isaiah was given to do. *Go and tell this people, Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing but never perceiving. Make the heart of this people calloused, make their ears dull and close their eyes.*

Isaiah was to go to God's people, and pronounce God's word to them. But as he did that, they would refuse to pay attention. Even when Isaiah told them that was what they were doing! And as they did that, they would become more and more resistant to God's word. And that would lead to disaster.

It was actually what had been going on for some time. Even though the country was materially secure and comfortable, the people had been leaving God on the side-lines more and more. And that meant that they faced God's judgement. God knew that continuing to challenge them about it would not change them – but they would have no excuse. Isaiah would continue to warn them – they would continue to ignore him, and each time they did, they would actually be hardening their hearts against the Lord and making it more and more impossible for them to ever repent.

That was the historical situation. But God is still the same, and people are still the same. God is holy – completely separate from sin. That means that if we are to have any relationship with him at all, it will involve repentance on our part, just as it did for Isaiah.

But so often we don't want to repent. We'd like to have God as our friend, but not if it involves anything as radical as repentance. So we resist his holiness. But as you do that, you build a barrier between you and God.

It is serious stuff. Why is it that sometimes when we have a big baptism service, a whole church full of people will hear the gospel, and will leave saying how much they enjoyed the service, but will not have responded to the message? Is it because the message is obscure and complicated? I don't think so. It is because their hearts are calloused. They don't want to hear, and so they will increasingly become unable to hear.

But, of course, it isn't just about non-Christians resisting the gospel. Why is it that in Moreton there are so many who have professed Christian faith, who now are not part of a church? They know that God's word says 'don't give up meeting together.' So when they reject that, for whatever reason, they harden themselves against God's word, and against his rule.

And what about us? I think there is a principle here that we need to take on board. If you hear God's word, and it addresses an issue in your life, but you aren't prepared to deal with that issues and do what the word says, you'll be in just this position. And next time the word comes along, you'll find it a bit easier to ignore it.

This is a very uncomfortable thing – I find it very uncomfortable. But it isn't the last word. Back to the end of Isaiah 6. *Then I said, For how long, O Lord? – which seems like a pretty reasonable question when you've just been told that no-one is ever going to pay any attention to your preaching! And he answered, 'until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant, until the houses are left deserted and the fields are ravaged, until the Lord has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken.*

And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste. But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land.

Even though humanly speaking things look bleak, God is at work. For Isaiah that meant that even though God's people were headed for exile, they would come back, and that from them a saviour would come. And because that saviour has come, for us it does mean forgiveness.

But that mustn't blind us to the challenge. We live in a society which does have calloused hearts – people can hear the gospel, and it is like water off a duck's back. The answer isn't in better preaching or evangelism – it is in prayer, because only if God in his great mercy breaks that hard shell, opens those blind eyes, will anyone ever respond.

You'll know that the PCC have identified prayer as one of our 3 key priorities for the next couple of years. And I think that this helps us to see why it is so important. We long for others to come to know Jesus – but that isn't going to happen unless first of all God softens their hearts, unless God opens their eyes to their need and his provision. God's holiness means that without Jesus people are alienated from God. But by and large people just don't realise it – when it comes to the gospel their ears are as dull and their eyes as closed as the people of Isaiah's time. Those of us who do know and love the Lord need to be seriously committed to praying that he would graciously be softening hardened hearts, unblocking closed ears, opening closed eyes.

And, of course, if this morning you are one of those who has never repented and turned to Jesus, you are in the position of these people. That barrier between you and a holy God is still there. And you will find it easier and easier to justify to yourself not doing anything about it. Don't put it off, or ignore the warning here, or your heart will become as hard as the people's then.

God is holy. He is completely separate from sin. But in his mercy he has made a way for us to know him – Jesus, the sinless one, died to make that possible, and it is the most wonderful good news. If it is good news for you, it's because God has opened your heart. And what he has done for you, he can do for others. If you care about others, you'll give yourself to praying that God will bring them to repentance, so that they too will have the joy of knowing him.

PRAY