

Holy, holy, holy

If you were here in church last week, you might remember that we looked at Ezekiel chapter 37. That strange vision of the prophet Ezekiel, of seeing the valley of the dry bones, of God telling Ezekiel prophesy to those dry bones, and, following Ezekiel's prophesying, the bones coming together, of bodies being restored, and ultimately, God breathing life into them. It is a well known story – and probably the best known part of the book of Ezekiel. But even so, it is very strange – something that is way beyond our experience.

There are many parts of the bible that are beyond our experience. From the grand visions of Ezekiel and of John in the book of Revelation. To very strange but much less grand things like a talking donkey (Numbers 22) or even the mysterious stirring of the waters of the pool of Bethesda (John 5). But all these things are part of our scriptures, and are useful to us (for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16)), so it pays to not skip over them, but rather to consider what we might understand from them and find useful in them.

Today's Old Testament reading, from Isaiah, is one of those things that are beyond our experience, although the nature of Isaiah's vision is quite different from Ezekiel's experience of the Valley of the Dry Bones. It takes place somewhere we know, it takes place in the temple.

Isaiah sees a vision of God in the temple. We know the temple is where the people of Israel would expect God to be – there was a curtain that separated the rest of the temple from the Holy of Holies, where they held that God was, and only on one day of the year, on the day of atonement – Yom Kippur – would the high priest enter the Holy of Holies and encounter God.

But in Isaiah's vision, God isn't behind the curtain, God isn't in the Holy of Holies, instead, we read that Isaiah "I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple." (6:1b)

God is not contained within a part of the temple – instead the train of God's robe is filling the temple. The temple is effectively filled with God's glory.

And further, "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". (6:2)

I don't know about you, but I've never seen any seraphim. I've seen attempts at illustrations of them, but I'm not convinced by them. I think they're one of those things that's outside human experience, but Isaiah does his best to describe them. The seraphim are a type of heavenly being, like the angels are or the cherubim are. Like the heavenly beings that David referenced in today's psalm (Psalm 29:1). And all of those heavenly beings worship and serve God.

Isaiah's vision comes at the start of chapter 6, and the first five chapters of Isaiah have a harsh message for the people. He'd given them the promised land, but things hadn't gone well. In fact, things had gone badly – and there were consequences.

Those chapters tell us that God was going to let those consequences happen - they would be cut down by the invaders and all that will remain is a stump. But, even then, there was hope from God, because one day a faithful shoot would rise from that stump.

The essence of Isaiah's message is in his very first chapter (Isaiah 1:16-17,19-20)

Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong.

¹⁷ Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow... ¹⁹ If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the good things of the land; ²⁰ but if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword.” For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

And of course, that remains the message for all people today: Stop doing wrong. Learn to do right. Seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Look after widows and orphans.

But in Isaiah’s time, the people hadn’t listened.

The opening of our reading tells us when Isaiah had his vision: In the year that King Uzziah died.

Which doesn’t mean much to us... but it was an important year, it was a year that the people knew. Think about the dates that might be meaningful to us:

December 7, 1941

November 11, 1975

September 11, 2001

February 24, 2022

October 7, 2023

Just like those dates might be meaningful to us, so the year King Uzziah died was meaningful to the people of Judah.

Uzziah became King of Judah after his father was assassinated, and he then reigned as king for 52 years – which is a staggering amount of time for that period. He would have been the only king that many people in Isaiah’s day had ever known. And he was a good king. (2 Chronicles 26), “he did what was right in the sight of the Lord.” Except, like all the other kings, that wasn’t the full story, and as 2 Chronicles 26:16 tells us “But after Uzziah became powerful, his pride led to his downfall. He was unfaithful to the Lord his God..”

Uzziah’s pride led him to enter the temple without proper humility before God, and he was immediately struck with leprosy. This affected all the people of Judah: their king was sick – and ritually unclean – and so was unable to fulfill his duties. And to make matters worse, Assyria was becoming very powerful and was threatening to invade.

Years before, the kingdom that King David ruled had been split in two: Israel to the north and Judah to the south. In the year that King Uzziah died, the Empire of Assyria made its first move into the northern Kingdom of Israel. Assyria captured a huge chunk of Israel.

And then they captured more land. They killed or enslaved the people. They destroyed the Kingdom of Israel and laid siege to the city of Jerusalem.

It was a horrible time for the people of Judah, and it all began the year King Uzziah died.

So, in the midst of all this uncertainty and anxiety, what did the prophet Isaiah do? He prayed. He worshipped God. He had his vision. And central to that vision was the assurance that the Lord was on his throne.

Yes, kings come and go. Nations come and go. The fortunes of God's chosen people rise and fall. But through it all, God is faithful. The Lord is on his throne. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.

And so it is for us. You've probably noticed that there's a lot of things wrong in the world – and a lot of things wrong in our lives, too. Even in our relative security here in St Ives, there's a lot of uncertainty. The cost of living. Interest rates. The cost of living crisis. The housing crisis. They touch on all our lives. But in the midst of whatever is happening in our lives, or in the world around us, we can remember that the Lord is on his throne. Jesus has paid the price for all that is wrong with the world. The Spirit dwells within us to empower us and inspire us. God is faithful.

The challenge, of course, is to be as faithful to God, as God has been faithful to us. And that is a challenge that the people of Israel and the people of Judah had failed.

And yet, despite their failure, God reached out to them through the prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah had a vision of the Lord on his throne, with the seraphim flying around, and they were calling to each other "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory"

That's the response we need to make when we come to know God. God who is in glory beyond our mere human experience, we must cry out "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty;"

In our usual communion liturgy, we make a point of joining in that declaration, when I say 'With the faithful of every generation, we praise your holy name, and we join together saying or singing "Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might. Heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest."'

It's humbling to think of all these heavenly beings worshiping God eternally, and us just joining in from time to time. To think that when we worship God, we join in with worship that has always been, and always will be. It can serve as a reminder that the world doesn't revolve around us. We see it throughout the scriptures, mighty people of faith, far more 'important' than us – Moses, David, Elijah, Isaiah, Paul, John and all the rest, being humbled before God. But also being part of God's plan.

And ultimately, more than 700 years after Isaiah's vision it was God the Son who humbled himself, to be born in a stable in Bethlehem, to take his place among people like Moses, David, Elijah, Isaiah, Paul and John and you and me.

I think Isaiah's vision is also encouraging to us. Because the seraphim remind us, that there is more than this world. We believe, as we said in the Nicene Creed, that God created "all that is, seen and unseen." That there is more than what we see reminds us that it is not up to us to solve all the problems of the world. It is God's world. God is on his throne. God is in charge. And God has plenty of beings that can do God's bidding. It is simply our privilege, and our blessing, and our responsibility to be part of God's mission in our own, small way.

Isaiah responds to his vision, not by joining in the chorus of "Holy, holy, holy", but by saying "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 6:5)

Isaiah's first response to this incredible vision that he has is to confess that he is not worthy. He is not worthy to be in the presence of God. He is not worthy to receive this vision.

And that should always be our response when we worship God. To recognize that we are not worthy. That's why, each week, we confess our sin in church.

But Isaiah's vision doesn't end there because he is unclean. After he confesses, God forgives him his sin, and makes him worthy. Just as we are reminded of God's forgiveness each Sunday.

Once Isaiah is forgiven, and then, and only then, is Isaiah ready to respond to God. In response to the voice of God saying "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" Isaiah can say "Here am I. Send me!"

It's the same with us. It's only after we have confessed, and only after we have received forgiveness (and I think only after we've accepted that forgiveness), that we can properly serve God.

We come together to worship. But we also come together to be the church together. To be the body of Christ. To grow in the knowledge and love of God: God the Father who created us, God the Son who died for us and saved us, and God the Holy Spirit who inspires and empowers us. To share that knowledge and love with each other, but also with those beyond our doors. People who haven't heard. Or have turned away. Or been led astray.

We do well, I think, as a church of praising God, of saying "Holy, holy, holy" in response to encountering God. We appreciate God's power and might and love and grace, and we respond to that with praise and adoration.

And we do well in responding in confessing. But I think we do less well in accepting forgiveness – whether it's God's forgiveness or the forgiveness of each other.

When we get through praise and confession and forgiveness, how do we – and I mean by that we as the one holy catholic and apostolic church, we as the Uniting Church in Australia, we as St Ives Uniting Church, and we as individuals – how do we go with responding to God saying to us, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?"?

That is God's question to us. To all of us and to each of us. Because this world really does need God. And we get to be part of God's reaching out to the world – the world that really, really needs God.

Of course, we need to remember that it is God's mission, not ours, and while God's mission isn't dependant on us – either as a church or as individuals - we do have an important part to play in God's mission. And it is our privilege, our blessing, and our responsibility, to do just that.

And we can do that, to the glory of God. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty.

Amen.