Sermon: 6th February 2022

# Congregation context:

This was preached twice:

* In person in St Mary’s church as part a lay lead service of Morning Prayer to a small congregation of aged between 30 and 70 years old. No clergy were present.
* On a Zoom livestream as part of a fully on-line evening service to a congregation of 24 people aged between 60 and 80 (excluding the two clergy).

The sermon used music extracts which are annotated below.

# Sermon

Unexpected encounters with God

For once I have given my sermon a title since that it one of the common themes running across today’s readings. Neither Isaiah nor Simon Peter were prepared for their encounters. And in the Epistle, Paul refers to his own encounter which was equally unexpected. Each of these encounters lead to the three things; the three “R”s: Recognition, Redemption, Renewal. I’ll come back to these.

The unexpected can be quite refreshing. Before the children were born, Liz and I used to be regulars at the Proms each summer in the Royal Albert Hall. From this there is one piece that I remember well: I did not know it and so I got a surprise. Have a listen to this:

[cue intro][[1]](#footnote-1)

This is the introduction. It goes on like this for nigh on four minutes, building up a picture which is quite dark and menacing, [cue end intro][[2]](#footnote-2) even when it gently fades away. What picture has this built in your mind? What do you expect to happen next? A bold stirring theme in dark colours? [Cue theme][[3]](#footnote-3) Let’s listen again to the end of that introduction and what happens next. [wait for the repetition of the theme] Is that what you expected?

The start of Isaiah’s writing is a bit like that music. If you dip into the first 5 chapters of Isaiah at random, you find it is full of doom and gloom. The scene is dire with Isaiah criticising the way the Judeans have fallen away from God and appear to be abandoning him. And then we get that remarkable reading that we had just now. The effect is not as trivial as that musical excerpt just now, but the surprise is there. Not what we would have been expecting. It would be as unexpected for us, the modern reader, as it was for Isaiah when it occurred. This is a direct and unexpected encounter with God.

Isaiah panics. “Woe is me. I am lost! I am a man of unclean lips and live amongst people of unclean lips”. Isaiah is recognising that in many ways he is no better than the people he has just spent 5 chapters describing. And here he is face to face with his maker and expecting to be called to account.

We see much the same occurring with Simon Peter in the new testament reading. Jesus uses Simon Peter’s boat as a floating pulpit for his preaching on the lake shore. And when he has finished he then tells Simon Peter to put out to fish and Simon Peter is faced with a major catch, one that threatens to break his nets and swamp his boat. Now Simon Peter is a professional fisherman; he knows his waters; and he has been out all night without catching a single fish. I can picture him continuing to work on the nets while Jesus was preaching. And I can picture his reaction when this preacher, who might know about God but, in Simon Peter’s mind, certainly knows little about fishing, tells him to go fishing again. Simon Peter humours Jesus and goes out, and discovers the catch of all catches: not only many more fish than his nets or those of his partners can handle, but also the unexpected encounter with God. Like Isaiah he recognises his unworthiness and panics ‘When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.”’.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul also references his unexpected encounter with God. Although he does not give details about the road to Damascus, he emphasises his complete unworthiness to receive any mercy given his previous persecution of the church.

Each of these people has been brought up short; each suddenly finds themselves facing and having to recognise the reality of their sins. Petrified, they each wait for God react.

But instead of being called to account and asked to explain himself, Isaiah is immediately cleansed. His recognition of his unworthiness is sufficient. He is relieved of his guilty conscience in one simple move.

Likewise with Simon Peter, Jesus makes no reference to what is past and relieves Simon Peter’s fears with the words “Do not be afraid”. I hear an unwritten statement “I am not here to judge you”.

We read in Acts that Saul (as Paul was then known) was mildly chastised “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”

From that point on, the slate is wiped clean for each of them. They have recognised their unworthiness. They are redeemed.

And what was their response? Their response was each to renew their lives by becoming messengers of the most High:

* Isaiah, a royal adviser, volunteered his services: he responded to the question “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” with the answer “Here am I, send me”
* Simon Peter and his partners, fishermen, responded with action: “they left everything and followed Jesus”
* Paul, a pharisee, did not know what to do: so he obeyed the command “enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”

In his epistle, Paul concludes his reference to his unexpected encounter with the words “but by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain”. And that grace is the hinge: the key to our encounters with God. By the grace of God each one of these three recognised their unworthiness, were immediately redeemed from their sins, and renewed their lives to become messengers of God.

And those are the three things I would like to leave with you today: recognition, redemption and renewal. Our route to service of God is based on these three:

* Recognising our unworthiness before him. My great-uncle used to repeatedly tell his family “do what I say, not what I do”. And preaching to you, this is exactly how I feel. So take a step back and contemplate Isaiah. If you can, dip into the previous chapters to get a taste of the context and then consider how you would react if you are faced with your maker in such a sudden fashion. How would you react? I find it the prospect quite frightening.
* Which leads us to redemption. This is the wonder, the grace, the love: without any criticism, our sins are washed away so completely. We can make a new start. Consider the words of the seraph in Isaiah: “your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for”. And of Jesus “Do not be afraid”.
* So whilst I find it frightening, we should not be frightened, so long as we remember the third element is renewing our lives: ensuring that we make the best use of that clean start. What could you do differently to ensure that God’s grace has not been in vain?

That is how we become messengers of God in our daily lives. We are not all asked to drop everything. But we are all asked to follow Jesus. To adapt Paul: by the grace of God we are what we are. By the grace of God we are readily forgiven and cleansed, and his grace toward us will not in vain.

I will end with a very short prayer adapted from the words of the centurion to Jesus. I am not worthy to that you should come to me, but only say the word and I will be healed.

Thank you, Lord Jesus. Amen.

1. The musical excepts are all from Dohnányi’s “Variations on a Nursery Tune”. This cue was the first 30 seconds the Introduction. This is a dramatic orchestral build up in a minor key. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This cue was the last 30 seconds of the Introduction. The build up described above subsides into a very quiet minor key, until a loud chord right at the end. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This cue was the last 20 seconds of the introduction and segues into the first 20 seconds of the Theme. In Britain, we know the theme as the first two phrases of the tune “twinkle, twinkle little star”. It is played on a solo piano and repeated with quiet string accompaniment in a major key, in stark contrast to the Introduction. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)