

## Sermon Archive 202

Sunday 27 May, 2018

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Isaiah 6: 1-8

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



King Uzziah had reigned for 52 years. He was a very experienced king, a safe pair of hands. His reign was described as being second in prosperity only to that of Solomon. Stability, solidity, leadership we know and trust. Well that's all gone now, because he's dead. And new hands are having to steer, to form, to mould the nation. There will be some anxiety - akin to the anxiety we might feel when new and inexperienced ministers of the crown take up their virgin portfolios. How will this one deal with a groaning hospital system? Will that one's budget allocate resources fairly and developmentally? Will that one avoid having unwise meetings with managers of Radio New Zealand? Some people aren't quite sure - because this leadership is new. And something about Uzziah's really long reign beforehand, only accentuates the newness. Uzziah has died, and the next stretch of the road could be tricky.

Actually we know that it's already been tricky. The first five chapters of Isaiah, leading up to today's strange vision in the temple, set out some of the things that have already been going off course. In the land there has been corruption. There's been a looseness with the truth - obfuscation, lying, insulting. The tongue has been revealing the heart. The whole head is sick and the whole heart is faint. The people are described as being laden with iniquity. So says Isaiah. And for him, the writing's on the wall. No good will come of this. Israel is in for a terrible time. Chickens will come home to roost, and the whole structure of society is going to break under their collective weight. Is it revolution? Is it implosion? Is it a slow, groaning decline and fall? Isaiah's not sure - and frankly most of the people don't care - they can't see there's a problem - and yet the slow, quiet anxiety intuited within . . . What can be said to a people in a time like this? Into that strange mixture of denial, indifference, warming anxiety, into that failing of civilization, what needs to be said? What prophetic word, correcting word,

vision-spawning word, might a person of faith whisper, stutter, loudly proclaim?

Initially, anyway, don't ask Isaiah! At his first moment of maybe realising that he has a responsibility to speak, and that he has insight from which to speak, speaking is something from which he runs. He doesn't have the words. Into his regular devotions, a quiet trip to the temple, maybe to read the Bible, say a couple of prayers, maybe be noticed by the elders, God suddenly erupts. God fills the whole place. There's smoke and shaking and noise, and the swooping and fluttering of supernatural beings. There's the covering of faces, the crying of "holy", and a sense of this great hem of heaven having fallen hard on the earth. This is the holiness that the nation has neglected, rejected, forgotten. This is the cure for the people. This is the attention captivation. This is the God claiming back the fainting heart, the sickness of head. Speak **this** to the people! Proclaim it to the nation. Enunciate it to the whimpering decline and fall.

Except Isaiah, initially, says "no". My lips cannot form this word. They cannot speak this language. They are unclean lips - bound to be failing.

One of the seraphs, those weird sounding flapping, flying things, responds. It responds by taking a live coal from the altar, using tongs, because it's hot, and touching the coal to Isaiah's lips. Searing, blistering, damaging, hurting, language changing . . . It is proclaimed for Isaiah, the reluctant prophet, who doesn't believe that he can speak to the moral disaster that is his world, that now he has something to say. His lips can serve the God he can't describe. Where the ineffable mystery of the divine meets the deep need of the world, and its intransigence, a new set of lips is given. In the spirit of last week's Pentecost, a new language sounds forth.

Since last weekend a number of people have asked me what I thought about a sermon preached by the Most Reverend Michael Curry at a wedding. Pretty much everyone who asked me, went on to make the observation that this was the first time that a sermon like **that** had found its way into a wedding like that. It was not your usual way of royal speaking. Was it bemusing, amusing, appropriate, connecting? Most certainly "connecting". Various expressions on various royal faces suggested that connection had been made. To what result, effect, the jury was split - but connection had

been made. This way of speaking had been noticed. It was certainly new. And we read in the old story of a prophet called Isaiah, of an angel touching the prophet's lips - that he might not stay silent, but speak anew.

What new speaking, what new language, what alternative grammar do we need to find?

Could it be, as Michael Curry suggested, the language of love? Where the falling of civilization is being fuelled by language about hate (I hate you Syria, I hate you North Korea, I hate you Salisbury, I hate you Russia, I hate you Maori, I hate you boat person, I hate you Muslim, I hate you Jew, I hate you parent of the child in poverty, I hate you, I hate you, I hate you . . . If we found a way of expressing ourselves, of describing our God, of articulating our hope for the world, with words of love, might not that be "coals to the lips", a new and prophetic way of speaking to the health and healing of the world?

Or maybe it's the language of truth. Where the news is fake, so the people have stopped listening, where the word is false, so the people have stopped trusting or believing, where the excuses are trite and perfunctory, so the people have stopped expecting, could a rededication of our speaking to truth, our respecting truth, our aiming for truth, not be a way of speaking that the world needs to hear. As we say "truth matters", could not that be taking coals to the lips. As we confess our faults, as we take responsibility for what we have done, as we are honest about ourselves (no dissembling, no convenient, self-protecting half truth), would not that be a new articulating of the ineffable One, a new prophecy for the heart-fainting world?

Or maybe it's the language of the taking away of sin. The seraph said to me "Now your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out". Where much of our speaking comes from the language of blame, could absolving, redeeming, forgiving be the new connecting speech? Ancient grievances perpetuated, it's your fault, you're no good, you'll never change or be free, you deserve nothing, your suffering is just - because punishment is all you deserve. You are bad, "I am a worm, not a man!", who will save me from this body of death? Into **that** we speak "There is therefore now

no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus". Into **that** we speak "Woman, where are your condemners? Neither do I condemn you". Into that we speak "bring out a robe - the best one - and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost, but now is found!" Is not speaking like this to the world, coal to the lips and the prophet speaking? The language of forgiveness and freedom.

Or maybe the language we need to learn is the language of courage and service. "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, "Here am I; send me!" Civilization fails when everyone says "send someone else". I am not available. There is no social contract. My life is quite self-contained, thank you, and as I do not need you, so you shall not have me. We are not each other's keeper. "There is no such thing as society". Into **that** shall we speak like this? I am here. I am willing. "Yes, I will". "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit, so he went around doing good and healing all who were oppressed." Brother, sister, let me serve you. If our lives spoke that language, might not that bring coals to the lips of others - help the world find its own new, healed way of speaking and living?

That's enough . . .

-ooOoo-

King Uzziah died. The world was nervous. In the land there was corruption and sickness of head and heart. Chickens are coming home to roost, and the road is rocky. God changes the speaking of the reluctant prophet until the vision of God overwhelms the temple, and a new courage is found. "Whom shall I send?" says the voice of the Lord. And I said "Here am I; send me!"

A moment of quiet.

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