THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ISAIAH

iii. When things are at their worst

Isaiah 6:1-13

Isaiah is given a vision which transformed his life. The year is circa 740 BC with the death of King Uzziah perhaps the most successful king of Judah since Solomon. However, like Solomon, he failed the test of success and succumbed to pride towards the end of his reign. He usurped the role of the High Priest. Struck down with leprosy, he was banished from Jerusalem with his son Jotham serving as regent. With the human throne empty, Isaiah slips into the Temple to reflect and pray and there he encounters God, seated upon his throne in majestic glory.

Isaiah was not the only prophet to receive a vision from God. Jeremiah received direct assurance of God’s providence during the time of Judah’s last five kings and the fall of Jerusalem. Ezekiel, speaking to desolate captives in a foreign land, was given a vision of God’s omnipotence that the failures of God’s people could not negate. Daniel, one of Nebuchadnezzar’s captives in Babylon was assured of the sovereignty of God, enabling him to look beyond the people’s despair to hope.

But Isaiah was given something else, above and beyond the other prophets. His vision saw the manifestation of God’s holiness, the essence of his character from which all his attributes flowed. Isaiah said “I saw the Lord”. His statement seems to contradict the experience of Moses whose request to see God’s glory was met with the response “You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live” (Exodus 33:20). He had to be content with standing in the cleft of a rock whilst the aftermath of God’s glory passed by. The apostle John tells us “Isaiah saw Jesus’ glory and spoke about him” (John 12:41) God graciously accommodated himself to Isaiah’s ability to comprehend him.

Isaiah’s emphasis on the thrice holy God saw him use the title “the Holy one of Israel” twenty-six times as opposed to only six times in the rest of the Old Testament. Alec Motyer helpfully unpacks it as follows, ‘Holiness is God’s hidden glory. Glory is God’s ever present holiness’. Isaiah’s initial description of the Lord Almighty (Adonai) lays stress on the majestic transcendent God of the universe before whom he prostrates himself in reverent fear and awe, “Woe to me, I am ruined” (v5). In response a seraph, literally a ‘burning one’ reflecting the utter holiness of God, touches the prophets mouth in an act of atoning sacrifice, removing Isaiah’s guilt. Having been confronted by God’s transcendence as Adonai, he now experiences God’s immanence as Yahweh, the covenant God of Israel who forgives the sin of his people through costly sacrifice.

Isaiah overhears God’s request “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” (v8), he responds in the affirmative. His undertaking to be a prophet appears at first glance to be mission impossible (vv 9b-12). However, v13 refers to the “holy seed” which is expounded in Isa 11:1-5, a reference to Christ as the fulfilment of Genesis 3:15. Isaiah’s ministry involves both forthtelling, speaking to his present context where people are more concerned about peace and prosperity than reliance upon God, and foretelling by way of predictive prophecy culminating in Isa 11:9 “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea”.

JB Phillips little classic *Your God is Too Small* is a reminder that Isaiah’s God is great and glorious. His vision transcends the southern kingdom of Judah in a time of transition to that of the Kingdom of God which knows no end. Jerusalem will become the New Jerusalem “The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city and his servants will serve him…And they will reign for ever and ever” (Rev 21:3-5).

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