

The Archdeacon's Charge 2023 Northampton Archdeaconry

Isaiah 6: 1-8

There's a story of an Archdeacon who was delivering the Archdeacon's Charge, slowly and ponderously, at the Churchwardens' Admission Service. He had majored on downpipes and faculties and had been speaking for half an hour when, in frustration, someone near the back of church lobbed a hymnbook at the Archdeacon. It missed the Archdeacon but hit a Churchwarden who was sitting in the front row in the back of the head. The Churchwarden turned round and shouted, "Throw another one – I can still hear him!"
I hope it won't be quite like that this evening.

Before we get going ...

- Thanks to the home team for welcome, worship and hospitality
- Thanks to the RDs and Lay Chairs for their leadership and inspiration through the deaneries
- Thanks to Chel the long-suffering and hard-working PA to the two archdeacons. Please read and keep the sheet on your seat.
- And thanks to the churchwardens
- In cinematic terms, churchwardens are
 - the speech therapist in *The King's Speech*
 - the forger in *The Great Escape*
 - Barnes Wallis in *The Dambusters*
 - often in the background ... generally unseen ... but the strength behind the whole operation.
- Thank you for all that you do at a time in history when the church in the UK is going through tough times.

Let's take a look at Isaiah 6. There's so much that could be said:

1. King Uzziah, a good king, was dead. But THE KING reigns. Seated on a throne. Never abdicating. We could focus on that tonight, but we won't.
2. As Isaiah sees the absolute authority and holiness of God (note the repetition – Holy, holy, holy) he becomes aware of his own sinfulness. We could focus on that tonight, but we won't.
3. God takes the initiative and atones for Isaiah's sin – echoes of what is to come with Jesus. We could focus on that tonight, but we won't.
4. Then the interesting interplay of singular and plural – one God and yet three persons – "Whom shall I send? (singular) And who will go for us?" (plural). We could focus on that tonight, but we won't.
5. Isaiah's response: "Here am I. Send me." We could focus on that tonight, but we won't.

So much that could be said, but I'm going to focus on what comes next ... the bit we didn't read:

God said, Go and tell this people:

Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.

Ever had a difficult message to share?

When (the now retired) Bishop John Flack was a vicar in West Yorkshire, a known prostitute started attending his church. Some members (mostly women) started to 'tut tut' about her presence in the church. But John said nothing, hoping that people would accept that everyone is welcome in church. This went on for some weeks until John's wife said, "Your softly, softly approach isn't working. You'll have to say something." So the following week, in the notices, John said, "Next week when you come into church you'll notice that we have installed some airport security. You'll walk through a gate and, if you've ever done anything wrong, it will bleep. When I walk through it will bleep the loudest. Because this is the place we come when we need forgiveness. We receive bread and wine knowing that Jesus died for us, to set us free from the past. And if you don't need that forgiveness, you don't belong here – and you may as well go somewhere else." (Awkward pause). "Hymn 373". Some people objected to John's forthright approach and wrote to complain to the Archbishop of York. John was duly summoned by the Archbishop of York. Having motioned to John to sit down, without a word, the Archbishop went to his filing cabinet and retrieved a file. "This file is full of complaints concerning the way in which you dealt with the presence of a prostitute in your church. And on the basis of these complaints I am making you the Archdeacon of Pontefract."

That's not how we're choosing the new Bishop of Peterborough!

John Flack had a difficult message to deliver. It didn't go down well but it needed saying. Like Isaiah. What a difficult and discouraging message.

Ever hearing, but never understanding; Ever seeing, but never perceiving.

On one occasion, Jesus had walked on water and fed 5000. Then the Pharisees come and say, "Show us a sign that we may believe!" There's no pleasing some people. When it came to the Pharisees, everything Jesus did failed to impress. He had hard things to say to them. When you go home, take a look at Matthew 23. Having challenged the respected Pharisees (who in many ways held the power of life and death in their hands) to show consistency, love and mercy in their lives, Jesus says: "You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?" That's a tough message. That's a hard thing to say. But it needed saying. But was anyone really listening?

Does it ever feel that way for you? Sometimes, like John Flack, like Isaiah, like Jesus himself, we face tough and discouraging times. It's not easy. No one's listening. No one's paying attention. Apathy reigns. The UK has shrugged and turned its back on Jesus. Is that true? Not quite. Last year, the Gen2 Team undertook some research in the diocese.

- Children's Sunday attendance has dropped by 45% to 1000 over the past 10 years (ouch!), but there are now 5000 children in weekly church activities. Brilliant.
- 30% of churchgoers in Peterborough Diocese are aged 0-24. That's higher than I would have thought.
- 48% of our churches now run toddler groups, compared to only 27% 10 years ago.
- The percentage of churches that are actively engaged with their local schools has risen from 53% ten years ago to 98% now.

Times are hard in the church but there are wonderful signs of early and fragile growth. If you feel you are addressing your local community in words and actions and yet they are *ever hearing, but never understanding; ever seeing, but never perceiving* take heart. God is alive and well in these difficult days.

Do you like a happy ending? Me too. When I watched the last Bond film – Bond died! I almost needed counselling. That's not the ending I was expecting. Sean Connery would have escaped with the girl ... Roger Moore would have subjected us to two hours of relentless innuendo ... and Daniel Craig would have despatched the villain. But this?!

So let's finish on a happy ending.

At the end of this passage from Isaiah 6, Isaiah asks how long he has to put up with a people who are *ever hearing, but never understanding; ever seeing, but never perceiving*. God says, "*Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant ...*" but then concludes by saying, "*but as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land.*"

Isaiah looks forward to Jesus. The light who shines in the darkness of our world.

One last story. Some years ago there was an art exhibition in the Lady Chapel at Ely Cathedral. The chaplain was on duty each day to talk to people and respond to any questions. On the first day a woman came into the exhibition and stood still for an hour in front of one painting. The chaplain was going to approach her, but her whole body language said, "Don't talk to me!" So he stayed away and gave her space. She left. The next day she returned. Again she stood in front of that same painting – just staring, lost in thought. Again the chaplain decided that she wanted space and he didn't approach her. She left. The following day she was back. Once again she stood silently in front of the same picture. This time, the chaplain approached her and asked why she kept returning to look at the same painting. The painting was BIG. It was full of thick, dark, jagged strands of paint focusing on a white dot in the middle of the picture. Looking closer, the white dot was a small white dove amidst the brooding darkness of the painting. The woman said, "This painting is my life. It's hard. But I'm holding onto that little light in the middle. I'm holding onto Jesus." The chaplain listened and then prayed with her, in the presence of Jesus, the light who shines in our darkness.

May your ministry, however hard and dark, be filled with the light of the presence of Jesus.