

ORDINARY SUNDAY 5: FEBRUARY 7th
Isaiah 6:1-8; Luke 5:1-11

Notes:

- The ministry of Isaiah (speaking of the author of chapters 1-39) took place as Assyria was coming to power and his entire ministry was carried out under the shadow of their aggressive moves towards control of that part of the world.
- His ministry was carried out almost entirely in and around Jerusalem.
- His main theological theme was the holiness of God, a holiness that was coupled with supreme kingly power. His most used title for God is “the Holy One of Israel”.
- God was seen to be offended when the weak and the powerless were abused and exploited by others in the community. In his writings then there is a strong theme of social justice.
- Isaiah insists that God is delivering punishment on the people because they have failed to live up to the demands of their Covenant with him.
- Significant is Isaiah’s belief that God’s power is such that all things, all peoples and all history remain under his control and influence – even the Assyrians whose armies appear to be so powerful.
- All human plans are nothing more than folly. What they need to do is to get on with life and leave their fate in God’s hands.
- The royal advisors, false prophets and self serving priests are all condemned by Isaiah as teachers of destruction, as blind fools and as men who are using their positions for their own advantage and benefit.
- For Isaiah pride is the cardinal sin. For him it is the opposite of faith and a sin that brings judgment on the people.
- There is a message of hope in this section of Isaiah. Destruction is not necessary if the people repent and return to humble and obedient service of God. He acknowledges though, that this is unlikely for all the people and accepts that only a remnant will return and survive.

Today’s reading is important for the whole of the prophecy as it sets out the credentials for the ministry of the prophet. For many of the leaders and the influential people of the time, Isaiah’s ministry was seditious, disrespectful to them and the institutional religion and very irreverent. They wanted him out of their lives and sought to silence his teachings. It is thus, very important that Isaiah sets out the authority he has for acting and ministering in the way he does.

The king Uzziah is dead. He died in 742 and Isaiah begins by declaring that Yahweh, the God of Israel is their king. Importantly, he is not just the King of Israel. He is the Lord of all of creation as well as being Lord of history. If we read on from today’s reading we would see in verses 11-13 that the judgment of God is to fall very heavily on the his chosen people. Why is that? With the death of Jeroboam of the northern Kingdom, anarchy replaced peace and rulers and leaders struggled with each other for positions, wealth and power. Instead of serving God the people served their own needs. This is the message to which Isaiah will return time and time again in his writings: you cannot serve two masters. Either God is Lord of their lives and they live out their existence in faith and hope, trusting to his divine love and mercy. Or, they take their lives into their own hands and set about creating a life and a ministry

that suits what it is they want to be doing. The first option leads to peace and prosperity. The second option leads to death and destruction.

The point of today's reading is to help us ask the question: *How can we be sure that all will be well for us in the future?* It begins by making two statements: King Uzziah is dead. King Yahweh is on the throne.

The first of those statements acknowledges the fear and anxiety that must have been in the minds of the people. The rule of Uzziah had brought with it a period of peace and prosperity. The nation expanded its borders and was growing as a significant presence among the nations around them. They were filled with pride and they had forgotten the pain and suffering of previous times under earlier kings. All was well, so when the king died they wondered just how they were going to continue and what would happen to them. This is why Isaiah's second statement is so important. Yes, Uzziah the king is dead but now God is on the throne. Whatever was accomplished under Uzziah the human king can be surpassed by the heavenly king. It sets out starkly their options. They can turn to God or they can seek a human way forward.

Isaiah continues to present an overwhelming picture of God's glory and power. His throne is high in the air, so he can see over everything and nothing is his equal. The cloak of his kingly robe comes down and fills the whole of the temple so that there is no room for any courtly officials to be there. It is God's overwhelming glory that grabs our attention. He needs nothing more and no one else. He alone rules in power.

The rest of the images contribute to that overwhelming picture. There are angels, seraphim and cherubim all there to carry out the commands of God. He is no ruler simply sitting on his throne. What he says will happen. What he promises will come to fruition. These creatures around the throne sing out the praises of God: *Holy, holy, holy is Yahweh Sabaoth!* This is a song that tells us about God. He is holy – righteous, pure, just and powerful. He is not a God who is going to be tainted with the petty jealousies that are to be found among human rulers and among the gods of the nations around them. This God is Holy and his holiness flows out into his creation. The whole of the earth is filled with this glory and holiness of God.

We leave the throne vision with a feeling of magnificence and hope. The people have hope, in the midst of their problems, because God is mighty and he is seated on his throne. There is no vacant throne in heaven. God is not just a ruler, he is ruling. He does not just carry the title king but is carrying out his work as king in creation. If the people can believe this and live accordingly their future is rich with possibility.

What is the proper response to such a king? Isaiah sets that out for us as well: *Oh what a wretched state I am in! I am lost for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips.....* This kind of message will be taken up later in the prophecy as a call to repentance and an acknowledgement of the sinfulness of the people. It is only when they can come before God and see him as he truly is that they can then understand that they are sinful people in need of forgiveness and mercy. It is only from this position, on their knees before God that they can hope to tap into the rich flow of mercy and power that is offered to them from God's goodness.

Luke 5:1-11

Notes:

- Luke continues his presentation of Jesus as the prophet by having him teaching the word of God for the people to hear. We also see him here sitting down and teaching, which is also important for Luke's picture of Jesus.
- Lake Gennesaret is in Galilee and the setting here is near Capernaum.
- Simon is shown here, right from the beginning as the spokesman for the rest of the disciples.
- When the nets were full they were so surprised that they fell down to acknowledge the holiness of Jesus.
- Peter calls himself a sinful man and thus places himself alongside the prophets of the Old Testament.
- We now see the word "follow" which is found in all of the Gospels to mean not just a physical walking alongside Jesus, but a whole life commitment, a life that is live according to the demands of Jesus.

Luke in today's Gospel is continuing with his theme of Jesus the prophet sent by God and adds to it the story of Peter's faith, which is important because of his future role among the early faith community. But there is also a new significant insight being offered here. We see Jesus the teacher. And how can we have any confidence in this new teaching, especially as it comes from a man from an insignificant family in a nothing town in a forgotten province at the extreme of the Roman Empire? Luke's answer is look at the power he has. The actions of Jesus show the truth of his teaching and it is because he teaches with power that we can be filled with confidence.

It is important to make sure that we see what Luke is saying about Jesus. He is a prophet who predicts what will happen. He tells the disciples to fish knowing that they will be successful. And they are. In fact, his prophecy is fulfilled to the point of having the nets nearly break under the strain of the fish. This stands in stark contrast to what the disciples had tried to achieve on their own. They had fished all night and had caught nothing. This was their turf, their lake and they were the specialists, yet for all their skill they came home with empty boats. There are the two options set out for us.

It is by responding to the command of Jesus – without debate, without modification, without worrying about whether the command made sense or not and not thinking about how tired they were – that their nets were filled to breaking. On their own they would go hungry. Though they searched for fish, yearned for a good catch and had the expectation of finding fish – they ended up with nothing. Yet, by doing exactly the same thing, in exactly the same place but doing it at the command of Jesus, they had their longed for catch.

This is the message of the Gospel. The Good News is Good News for those who allow God to fill their nets. There are all kinds of alternative ways of finding "fish" in our lives but we are told, and we know by experience, that the satisfaction this kind of fish brings is very limited and passing. But we need fish and long for fish which is why the Father sent Jesus to become a man among us. He is the one who will feed us and direct us to the "great catch". When our nets are empty, he will fill them.

Importantly, though, Luke also sets out the manner in which we need to live if we are to hear the command of Christ in the events of our lives and if we are to live by his directions. Peter shows us: *When Simon Peter saw this he fell to his knees before Jesus and said "Leave me, Lord, for I am a sinful man"*. That is the only way that it will be possible to find life in the Kingdom. When we are on our knees before God, acknowledging our sinfulness and our need of God's loving mercy. When we are arrogant enough to think we can stand before God as a kind of equal and have our lives and our ministries set out in our own terms then we are doomed to have empty nets. The mission of Jesus was to bring God's salvation and with that salvation comes the blessings of the Kingdom. They are there for all those who are humble enough to respond to Jesus as did Peter.

Conclusion:

And so the readings continue to nudge us forward into this new year of grace. We are given a message that is so difficult for many of us in today's world to accept: humility before God. Luke's Gospel begins as it will end, with a call to repentance. It is about an offer of new life available to us in Christ but it is a life that is only going to be available to those who allow God to fill their nets. That is the tough part. We are called to be like Isaiah and Peter and move forward aware of our human limitations and willing to sacrifice all in order to live as God wants and to serve as God calls us to serve. We have a King to rule over us but we have to accept that rule. It is a rule that comes down to the minutia of our daily living and not just to the big issues and our Sunday worship. All that we do must be measured against the commands of God and we have to learn to evaluate everything we do in the light of the Gospel: Is this what Jesus is asking for? Is this how Jesus would respond? Is that what the Gospel demands? Then we will be Kingdom dwellers and know divine blessing. That is our programme for the year.