

Holy, Holy, Holy

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Preacher: Kanishka Raffel

[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 27th of February 2005.

The preacher is Kanishka Raphael and his sermon is entitled Holy, Holy, Holy. It's based on Isaiah chapter 6.

I'm really delighted to be here in the eastern states. That's because I'm normally in Perth, although I grew up on this side of Australia, so it's nice to be with you.

Why don't we begin by praying. Holy, Holy, Holy.

Lord God Almighty, I am a man of unclean lips and we are a people of unclean lips. Amen.

[1 : 15] Make yourself known to us in your mercy and power. For Christ's sake. Amen. Well, once or twice in my lifetime I have felt overwhelmed by my environment.

And most recently this has happened in Western Australia, a place to which I had never been until the Lord took us there. And when we've gone on family holidays to a few places I have found myself quite overwhelmed by the astonishing beauty, by the rugged nature of the landscape, by the intensity of it.

It's quite something to stand in a red earth kind of plain with not a hill to be seen anywhere and to be aware of your smallness.

Or to stand on the beach down at Esperance on the sort of southern part of the state. You can stand on a 40 mile beach of white sand and the sun is golden and shimmering over the few little islands in the Dantracasto archipelago.

And at your feet are Siberian swallows which migrate from Siberia to Esperance in January and see a kangaroo hopping by. And it's quite easy to feel overwhelmed, stunned by the Australian landscape.

[2 : 49] And I guess as Australians most of us sometime have that experience of being overwhelmed by the landscape.

But this passage that we've read from Isaiah is a passage in which we hear of the way in which the prophet has been overwhelmed by the presence of God.

And it is dominated, of course, by the idea of the holiness of God. He is the high and exalted one. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God almighty, the angels say.

The first way that children learn to make a point, a verbal point, is by repeating it. Please, please, please, please, please, please.

Hebrew writing does the same thing with just a little bit more finesse. Just twice in the Bible do we find the word holy repeated three times in succession.

[3 : 53] And both times that we find it in that way it is a reference to God. And both times, when it is used that way, we are given a glimpse of the heavenly throne room.

It is a way of saying that holiness is the essence of God. It is a way of saying that God is utterly and completely, awesomely and entirely, absolutely and infinitely holy.

The Lord Jesus teaches us to call God Father. It's a relational word. And for better or worse, it is a relationship which we experience with another human being here on earth.

But holiness is a description of God in his otherness, in his unlikeness to us. He is Father because he has adopted us as his children.

But in himself and by himself he is holy. He is not an earthly father. He is a holy father.

[5 : 03] He is not an earthly judge. He is a holy judge. And this passage teaches not only that God is holy, but teaches us why it matters.

So, firstly, the holy God is king. The first verse of this chapter raises the question of kingship. It was in the year that King Uzziah died that the prophet had his vision.

And the death of the king, especially in ancient times, raised the question of security. Uzziah had had a long and successful reign. Israel experienced military success, economic advancement, social stability under Uzziah.

But what now? What now that the king is dead? But Uzziah's vision takes him above these earthly concerns of the death of the local king to the cosmic reality of the kingship of God.

Uzziah sees the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted. He is the sovereign of the universe. The train of his robe fills the temple, Uzziah says.

[6 : 23] Yes, the king is dead. But the one who sits on the throne is still ruling from heaven. Well, what's happening in your life?

Perhaps you're battling illness. Perhaps you are, perhaps you're a student and maybe your exam results are coming in. Maybe you've done well.

Maybe you haven't done so well. Maybe you're occupied with stress at work or at home. Maybe you experience fractured relationships or the concerns of unwell parents or unruly children.

In the world, of course, there is war and famine and the threat of environmental disaster. And all these things are real enough. We know too well how real they are.

They need our attention and our prayers and our energy and our concern. But the Lord is on his throne. Nothing escapes his evaluating eye or his directing hand.

[7 : 35] It may be beyond us to know the significance or even the sense of some of our own experience. But know this.

The God who is holy is on his throne. And because we are Christians and not Hebrews, we may add that Jesus Christ is the guarantee that God is on his throne ruling the universe for the benefit of those who love him.

Not because he must. He is holy. He has no need of us and no debt toward us. He owes us nothing. And yet, he rules for our benefit because of his pleasure in the Son and his pleasure in all those who honour his Son.

The Holy God is king. Secondly, the Holy God is worthy to be praised. Notice the activity, how could you fail to notice the activity of the angelic beings who wait in attendance upon the Sovereign Lord.

They reverence God. They serve God. And they praise God. They're described as having three pairs of wings which seems a little excessive even for angels.

[9 : 09] Small joke. Until we see that two of their wings, with two of their wings they cover their faces and with two they cover their feet and with two they fly.

We're not really told why they cover their faces and their feet but the image suggests at least that it is reverential. The scriptures talk about the angels longing to look into things that God has revealed to humans and perhaps that is why their eyes are covered.

Knowing God is given to humans as a gift but maybe not to angels. They simply stand and serve. There is an aspect of reverence in their not presuming to look into the things that are his.

And similarly their feet are covered to symbolically indicate that they do not go where they wish to go wherever they please, wherever their own feet take them but they simply stand ready to do God's bidding, ready to serve him, ready to respond to his commands.

Not at all presuming that they might have their own plans and places to go but waiting upon the word of God that directs and sends them. It's the kind of thing that we teach our children when we teach them that song.

[10 : 26] Be careful little feet where you go. Be careful little feet, little eyes, what you see and let's all praise the Lord. I have little children so I know the words to that song.

It's a simple song. It's a childishly simple song but the sentiment applies as much to grown-ups as to children and perhaps that's what's reflected here.

The wings for flying of course mean that the angels are ready to do God's bidding and the meaning of the word angel is messenger. They are heavenly male persons.

That is, they're not male persons. You know, they're post persons. Heavenly post persons. I think we'll leave it there. While they wait, they occupy themselves with messages of God's greatness and the message of God's greatness is so great that merely speaking it is enough to shake the doorposts and the threshold and fill the temple with smoke.

The praise of God is a powerful reality and God makes himself known in the speaking of his praise.

[11 : 44] Have you seen that there is a close connection between praise and evangelism? Praise is to declare the character and deeds of God and evangelism is specifically to declare the kingship of God in Jesus Christ and the deeds of God in Jesus Christ and the scriptures teach us that God makes himself known in his word, his word of covenant promise, his word of gospel rescue.

God is known as his angels and his people speak of him and the reverse is true as well, isn't it?

Where no one speaks of God, knowledge of him declines and retreats. We have a tremendous battle in Western Australia to be allowed to teach scripture in schools and we have to sort of fight it one school at a time if I can use that rather inappropriately aggressive image.

But it's worth the fight because our culture is now experiencing perhaps in its second generation the decline in the knowledge of God and the children whom we teach in our primary schools have parents who never heard about Jesus in Sunday school or scripture classes.

Awareness of God in our culture is disappearing because so little is said of him and that is why no matter how cringeworthy it is to hear golfers and pop singers and anyone else thank God for what's good in their lives it's good that they do it.

[13 : 39] And so I hope you take the opportunity at your special celebrations your birthdays and weddings and funerals to speak of the Lord and of his role in your life when you have the opportunity to do that.

Recently there was a graduation of the new doctors at our local university and the sister of one of the students who had died before he graduated was asked to receive his degree posthumously and she spoke of his Christian faith and challenged the assembled professors and medical faculty to be reconciled to God.

That's great isn't it? It was marvellous to see them all squirming in their finery and I suppose she didn't she may not have crossed all her T's and dotted all her I's but she took the opportunity to praise the God who is holy because he is worthy to be praised and praise makes him known.

Thirdly the God who is holy exposes sin. Isaiah's response to God's holiness is rather in contrast to the angels. Look at verse 5 Woe to me I cried I am ruined for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips and my eyes have seen the King the Lord Almighty.

Isaiah's first and instinctive response to the glory of the transcendent and holy King is to acknowledge with anguish his moral failing.

[15 : 23] Perhaps some of you have had the experience of turning up to a function in the wrong gear and you know perhaps everyone else is in black tie and evening dress and you arrive wearing boardies and tank top and no shoes.

I remember when I was about 18 I turned up in white shoes and white trousers and a pink and white striped shirt and a red belt. Yes it was the 80s.

and I walked into a pub where the other 40 or so patrons were all bikies wearing denim and leather and studded belts and beards and very menacing pool cues.

Well as it happened I couldn't stay very long. Well that is the experience somewhat of Isaiah except that his inadequacy does not have to do with externals with being in the wrong place at the wrong time or simply being dressed in the wrong clothes.

He has unclean lips and that is a symbol of his general uncleanness his deep personal corruption exposed by the holiness of God.

[16 : 44] We have a way of contenting ourselves with our standard of moral achievement and we do it like this well I'm not one of them I may speed a little but I'm not into road rage I may indulge a little but I don't drink and drive I need to stay in the loop but I'm not a gossip we compare ourselves with each other and find someone who's worse than us but in the presence of the glory of the holy God there's no room for that kind of shallow excuse making Isaiah was a righteous and faithful man of God but he's struck immediately and deeply with his own sinfulness immediately he is in the presence of God but fourthly the God who is holy restores relationship

Isaiah rightly concludes that his sin is fatal for him that his sin in the presence of God's holiness is fatal for him if you turn up in a Hawaiian shirt at a black tie function it might be social death but when a sinner appears before God that means real death that's the teaching of the whole Bible and it's the destiny of every sinner who ever lived but the God who is high and exalted is pleased to dwell with those who are lowly and contrite of heart and so God completely out of his love completely unnecessarily out of his grace his undeserved kindness reaches out to Isaiah and provides for him at precisely the point of his need verse 6 then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand which he had taken with tongs from the altar with it he touched my mouth and said this see this has touched your lips your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for the God who is holy is sovereign in salvation if God did nothing

Isaiah and every other sinner along with him would be wiped out but God initiates salvation he brings it about and he completes it he sends the seraph who removes Isaiah's guilt he makes atonement he restores relationship and we need to get over the idea that God does this because he's lonely and we need to get over the idea that God does this because he's sort of codependent and he needs our love let's get over the idea that deep down we're really lovable and God sees the good in us God graciously unnecessarily for no reason removes our guilt pays our debt restores us to himself that's why we call it amazing grace it's amazing because we are so undeserving it's amazing because there's no reason for God to act in this way and no benefit to him for doing so it's amazing because the

God who does it is the holy one the king high and exalted whose glory fills the earth but precisely because he is that he acts in this way in time the grace that Isaiah experiences in being restored to God is multiplied a thousand times because we see more clearly than he did how guilt is taken away and sin atoned for the sovereign God provides his own son the Lord Jesus to be the sacrifice for atonement his death will do the cleansing his death will be our reconciliation the burning coals of God's judgment fall on him and make us free

Isaiah will speak of this later in his prophecy but he does not know of whom he speaks he speaks just of the servant of the Lord but we know who he is it is the son who sets us free fifthly the holy God sends his servant verse 8 says I heard the voice of the Lord saying whom shall I send and who will go for us and I said here I am send me notice a couple of things here the first is that although God has all his angels ready to do his bidding he invites the participation of people to do his work I suppose it's every child's thrill to be asked by a parent to help them out in some task at least young children are thrilled by that my children are still thrilled by it every parent knows that they take a risk when they ask a child to help every parent knows that they could do it better themselves but the child is thrilled to hear mum or dad say can you help me well all of this is all the more so for

[23 : 06] God he takes a very great risk when he asks us to work along with him and there's no doubt that he could do it better himself but he invites people to share in his work every child lives for the moment when mum or dad says will you help me how do you respond to God's invitation to be involved in his work and secondly notice Isaiah's response to the grace he has received here I am send me willing delighted cheerful self-giving it's worth noticing I think because so often our response to grace is well I don't have to do I'm saved by grace

I'm not going to earn anything by doing this I'm not going to lose anything by not doing it so grace means I don't have to doesn't matter if I come to church or don't come to home group youth group doesn't matter doesn't matter if I'm late doesn't matter if I don't pray doesn't matter if I don't say thanks doesn't matter if I don't listen I'm saved by grace so it doesn't matter if you see your response in any of those things then can I suggest that we need to ask God to give us such an understanding of his grace that we are bursting to play our part in his work eager to serve alert to see the needs that we can fill the people we can encourage the work we can contribute very often I think our response to grace is so ungracious we take God for granted we lose our awe at his holiness and we lose our wonder at his grace we use grace to excuse ourselves from service rather than to energise our service grace can make you a sloth or a servant how does it go with you?

Sixthly perhaps you've guessed that I'm heading for a perfect seven so we're nearly there Sixthly the holy God judges his people the message that God gives to Isaiah to speak to his people is a message of desperate hopelessness he gives him a message to proclaim he tells him in advance what response he will get and he tells Isaiah the reason for this bleak ministry go and tell this people be ever hearing but never understanding be ever seeing but never perceiving God sends Isaiah to a hard-hearted people with a message of their own hard-heartedness the Lord met Isaiah's confession with mercy but he will meet the hardness of heart of his people with judgment now if you look over the first five chapters of Isaiah you see what Isaiah's message is you hear it in the first five chapters and it's not that tricky he says to them stop your empty religion stop your haughtiness and pride stop your injustice protect the weak stop indulging your excesses stop your greedy accumulation it's actually a pretty easy message to grasp it's not in code but it will be rejected they will hear without understanding and they won't come to repentance and the more God's sinful people refuse God's word the more guilty they become people sometimes ask the question you know what happens to those who've never heard the gospel but the truth that the Bible teaches is that the people in most peril are those who have heard God's word over and over and rejected it again and again the more God's word is rejected the more hardened they become their hearts become calloused and their ears dull and perhaps the most bleak aspect of Isaiah's commission is that all of this hardness of heart is somehow within God's purpose otherwise they might understand and turn and be healed

God delights in repentance and Isaiah will call them to repentance but the God who is holy and sovereign is king over everything including unbelief it's an area we get we struggle in I suppose we struggle to complete our understanding of God's mercy and sovereignty but there are many certainties in this puzzle as we try to put it together does God harden their hearts against their will no do they harden their hearts in defiance of God's purposes no is God to blame then no are they not responsible no people who reject God do not escape his will he is not king over believers only and unbelief is not merely the exercise of freedom to choose it is rebellion to be left to the rebellion you have chosen is not freedom it is judgment the God who is king over all things remains king even over unbelief and to this day the gospel word about God's son is salvation to those who hear and repent and judgment on those who hear and harden themselves against it which of course is why gospel proclamation is spiritual warfare you see why it depends much more on prayer addressed to

God's throne than it does to techniques or speakers the apostles say to some we are the aroma of life to others the stench of death but it is the gospel that allows to see allows people to see the holiness of God the grace of God that deals with our sin so it is the gospel of Jesus that we must go on humbly carefully wisely boldly prayerfully proclaiming and we can do so perhaps with a little more confidence than Isaiah because this is not the dawning day of judgment this is the day of salvation this is the day of the gathering in of God's people this is the day when all God's people have been equipped with God's spirit and God's word to speak this truth and to make

[31 : 44] Christ known this is the day Peter says when God is patient so that people might repent Isaiah announces the arrival of God's judgment but we announce its delay so that people might repent we announce his invitation to salvation Isaiah's ministry would be an unrelieved burden in response to his cry how long oh Lord the Lord says until everything is gone until the Lord has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken but even in Isaiah's day there was a glimmer of light so seventhly that's the divine number as you know and lastly the holy God preserves his inheritance inheritance in the Bible the word but is often a word of hope and it is a word of hope in this chapter look at the last half of verse 13 but as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down so the holy seed will be the stump in the land there is a promise of a seed a holy seed left amidst the ruin of judgment there is the promise of hope the question that is unanswered for the time being is how will this be what hope will be left what can this holy seed be since

Israel is to be devastated even if there are people left how will they change their ways well in Isaiah's prophecy we'll hear of the Lord's servant in chapter 11 we read a shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse from his root a branch will bear fruit the spirit of the Lord will rest on him the spirit of wisdom and understanding the spirit of counsel and power the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord and he will delight in the fear of the Lord there is a holy seed in Isaiah's proclamation that we have seen that we have seen born into a great tree into a man who hung upon a tree for our sakes holy holy holy holy is the

Lord God almighty he is the sovereign worthy to be praised who exposes and heals our sin who is king even over unbelief and judges his people but preserves for himself a people to delight in we've most likely ever been granted a vision of this throne room but we have been granted a vision of the king we've seen him in his son bow before the king praise his worthiness receive his grace that cures our sin proclaim his mighty gospel pray for repentance and trust his promise amen amen to thank you my thank you again

I would thank you before after verse well thank you to well in so if