
The Five Ws

Isaiah 43.1-7, Luke 3.15-17, 21-2

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on January 10, 2010 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

I remember where I was and what I was doing. I was sitting with my older sister in the TV room in the house where we grew up. We were hurling cushions at each other, with a mixture of idleness and playfulness and savagery, as children do. I was about 8 years old. And that was the moment, just then, in the dizziness of being struck by a flying sofa cushion, that I had, for the first time, a sudden realization: "I am going to die." The terrifying thought swept over me, obscuring all other sensation. I didn't burst into tears, because tears seemed pointless. Tears are a call for help, and I had a deep sense that there wasn't anyone who could help. What horrified me about death was the blankness of isolation, of being eternally alone in a whiteout of unconsciousness. My sister noticed I'd stopped throwing the cushions back, and said "What's the matter?" I replied, monosyllabically, "One day I'm going to die." And my sister looked straight back at me and said, with gentle eyes, "Yes, we all are." And then I was dumbfounded again. How could she know this and still be able to idle time away throwing cushions?

Some while later it began to dawn on me that death might not involve nothingness. It might involve pain. The agony of pain inflicted on me, and the guilt of all the pain I'd inflicted on others. And so eventually, in my stumbling way, I arrived at the four great fears that strike all of us from time to time, and most of us overwhelmingly for short or long periods. Death, pain, guilt and isolation. So here we each are this morning, like little children, surrounded by pelted cushions, who've just discovered the truth about the world. Death, pain, guilt and isolation. These are the profound and justified fears that bring us to this place of worship, seeking a word of hope to encourage and sustain us.

And that word of hope comes from deep in the bowels of time, from the prophet Isaiah, writing in exile in Babylon two-and-a-half thousand years ago. And why are the prophet Isaiah's words so significant, written so long ago, so far away, with clothes and customs and assumptions and attitudes we most of the time think we've long grown out of? Because Babylon to an Israelite like Isaiah was the end of the world. Babylon was the epitome of death, pain, guilt and isolation. Death, because it seemed the dream of the promised land had died. Pain, because anyone who planned a renaissance for the Jews was toast. Guilt, because exile was a tragedy Israel had brought upon itself. And isolation, because Israel was like a teaspoon of sugar, and Babylon was like a huge cup of tea inexorably dissolving each granule till there was nothing left.

You could say this is the moment when the Christian faith begins. If Christianity is what emerges from seeing how God takes his love for Israel and makes it a gift for the whole world, then this moment, with Israel facing death, pain, guilt and isolation in exile, is where that faith begins. This is a nation in deep depression. This is the moment when Israel hits the very bottom. And so now let's see what the prophet Isaiah brings to a people who are disintegrating as fast and as irreversibly as a teaspoon of dissolving sugar.

Isaiah uses a technique that, if he were a modern-day journalist, he'd call the Five Ws. Back in the days before cable TV, the internet and blogsites, we used to have a profession called journalism. The Five Ws are a checklist journalists used to use to ensure their information-gathering was comprehensive. The Five Ws are the five questions you need to answer to have a good handle on any situation. Where? What? Who? When? and Why? In the first seven verses of his forty-third chapter, Isaiah sets about a comprehensive information-gathering exercise on Israel in exile. And his five Ws take the nation in a few short verses from the deep depression of death, pain, guilt and isolation to the hope that anticipates the Christian gospel. Let's look at how he does it, and think together about whether he can still do the same for us.

Isaiah says to Israel, "Where are you?" It sounds like a silly question. The obvious answer is, "We're in exile, a thousand miles from home, under an oppressive regime, facing extinction as a people and oblivion as a nation." But Isaiah says, "You are in the world God created. You're not just anywhere in space, floating aimlessly in a vast emptiness. You're in a world that God has personally formed and made, you're in a place that God has explicitly designed and shaped, you're in a very precise place, and most importantly you're at the very center of

God's concentrated gaze. You may feel like you're at the back of beyond, but in fact you're at the heart of it all. That's *where* you are."

Before Israel can furrow its brow in dismissive disbelief, Isaiah goes on to his second question. "Israel, *what* are you?" Again, the answer seems obvious. "We're a bunch of biblical has-beens, a rejected spare part of God's shelved providential project." But Isaiah says, "There are three words that sum up what you are. You are precious. You are honored. You are loved. You're *precious* to God, because you're at the very center of his purposes. That's as precious as precious can be. You're *honored* by God, because he's made you crucial to his vision for the whole creation. That's a place of incredible honor. And you're *loved* by God. In other words God doesn't see you as some kind of means to a further end, God doesn't *use* you as an instrument to some wider good, an instrument he can just toss away when it breaks or fails or he loses interest in it. God cares about you for your own sake, studies you intimately, knows you wholly and truly, and will never lose sight of you. Precious, honored and loved. That's *what* you are."

Okay, Israel may be thinking, we're getting the hang of this. But Isaiah has plenty more to say. "Israel, *who* are you?" Israel is ready with a quick answer: "We're God's ex – we're the rejected lover, the dumped partner, the embarrassing skeleton in God's cupboard." But Isaiah says, "You're mistaking God's anger for a lack of love. Indifference is a sign of lack of love. God isn't indifferent to you. God's angry with you. Anger's a sign of love, a sign of hurt love. God's not rejected you – you've rejected God, and God desperately wants you back. This is who God is. God is the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. D'you hear those words? *Your* God, of *Israel*, *your* Savior. You are part of God's name. You're integral to God's identity. God's made you part of who he is. And he calls you by name. That's the first thing he says to you. 'I have redeemed you; I have called you by name. You are mine.' God's made you part of his identity. So your identity is in God. The answer to the question 'Who are you?' lies in the question, 'Whose are you?' And this is God's answer: 'You are mine, Israel. That's *who* you are. You belong to me.'"

You can almost feel the muscles relaxing in Israel's disbelieving face, the tension of exile beginning to be transformed by the yearning poetry of God. Isaiah goes on, "Israel, *when* are you?" Israel knows these are not the good times. The obvious answer is, "We're on an island below sea level waiting for the tsunami finally to obliterate us. We're locked in a burning building waiting to be totally consumed by the flames." But Isaiah says, "When you pass through the waters, I'll be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you." Notice Isaiah doesn't say, "You won't find yourself in deep water; you won't walk through fire." Isaiah knows that's right where Israel is, and there's no use pretending otherwise. But that's the point. The promise is not, "You won't face death, pain, guilt, isolation. You won't face flaming fire and flooding water." The promise is, "*When* you face these things, they won't destroy you, they won't drown you, they won't overwhelm you, they won't fundamentally separate you from me." Isaiah recognizes the bad news about *when* Israel is. Israel is at the worst moment of its life. But Isaiah brings good news. "This is as bad as it gets, and this hasn't and won't destroy you or obliterate you or separate you from God."

And then there's one more W. Isaiah asks, "Israel, *why* are you?" In other words, "What's it all about, Israel? What's the meaning of your existence? *Why* are you?" Here we're at the root of Israel's despair, maybe our own despair. What's the meaning of life? It's a big question, maybe the biggest of all. But Isaiah isn't daunted by it. God's answer lies in three unambiguous words: "For my glory." Faced with the unrelenting threat of our own death, pain, guilt and isolation, we human beings understandably strive to make our own meaning, carve our own memorial, leave our own mark on the world. We create organizations, build edifices, have and raise children, invent products, devise theories, endow institutions, break records – all to stave off the ravages of time and hold back onrushing oblivion. But the truth is, there's only one thing that's eternal. And that's God's glory. Everything else is dust and ashes. What Isaiah is saying is, "Look, here's the miracle: God has invested his glory in *you*. That's the only thing on which you can rest any hope. And that is enough. That's the meaning of existence. To be a theatre for God's glory. And the amazing grace of God is this. He's made you part of the show."

Those are the five Ws that Isaiah gives Israel to reappraise and reassess its situation in the midst of exile.

You're not far away; you're at the heart of it all.
You're not a has-been; you're precious, honored, and loved.
You're not rejected; you belong to God.
You *are* in the fire, but God's right in there with you.
Your life isn't pointless; it's a reflection of God's glory.

But there's one crucial question, for the journalist and the believer, that doesn't begin with a W. For a Christian, it's the question that turns Isaiah's words from a promise into a reality. And it begins with an H. How? "*How* will all this happen? How will we know? How can we trust?"

Isaiah doesn't answer that question. We find the answer to that question in today's gospel reading, the account of Jesus' baptism. Jesus is baptized by John at the Jordan. The heaven opens, the Holy Spirit descends as a dove, and the voice says, "You are my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." Here every W-question finds its fulfilment. *Where* are we – at the waters, the formless waters of creation, the parting waters of the Red Sea, the waters of the Jordan that Israel crossed to enter the promised land. We're at God's new beginning. That's where we are. *What* are we? We're God's children, that's what. *Who* are we? We're God's beloved, that's who we are. *When* are we? Well, John's just spoken of fire, and here we are in the water. We're at a moment when we're terrified by the heat of the fire and the tidal wave of the water and yet we're at the very moment when the heavens open and the dove comes down to say God's right in it with us. *Why* are we? We exist for the glory of God – and look, at this precise second God's glory is fulfilled and he is well pleased.

There are five Ws, and they all culminate in the final question, How. And the answer is, the how is, Jesus. Isaiah dismantles Israel's despair and depression with five Ws, and God fulfils all five Ws in the all-important how. Jesus is that how. Jesus is the way God brings his people home from exile, the way he shows them they're precious, honored and loved, the way he calls them by name, the way he walks with them through fire and flood, the way he displays his glory. Jesus is the reason we trust in God. Jesus is God's word of hope to us in our exile of death, pain, guilt and isolation.

Sometimes I still feel like I'm 8 years old. Sometimes I feel like all the thrashings and strivings of my life are no more than a pointless sibling fight with tailored sofa cushions. Sometimes, quite often in fact, I still feel transfixed with the realization, "One day I'm going to die, and I could face endless pain, eternal guilt, or isolated oblivion." But Isaiah stands before me, still and steady like my sister did all those years ago, and holds my gaze, and says gently, tenderly, truly, "Yes, we all are. We're all going to die. But God isn't. That's the point. Your life has no meaning, no purpose, no lasting significance, except in this: God has made you his precious beloved, he's shaped his identity around you, he's with you in fire and rain, and you will live forever as a song to his glory." That's my only hope. And that is enough.