



Precious, Honoured, and Loved

A sermon by Revd Dr Sam Wells

Readings: Isaiah 43.1-7; Acts 8.14-17; Luke 3.15-17, 21-22

Not long ago I was doing a live broadcast on the radio. Just before I came on the producer brought in the man who was next on after me. Now speaking live to about 5 million people can be quite sobering, but this man was about as nervous as anyone I've ever seen. His hands were shaking so much he could hardly keep hold of the piece of paper on which he'd typed out the things he really didn't want to forget. The creases on the slip of paper indicated how much he'd fretted over it the night before. But on it were five short lines.

And that struck me. If you were about to face the scariest conversation of your life, and the night before you were too nervous to write an aide-memoire, so you typed five short lines, I wonder what they'd say. Israel in Babylon was facing the scariest time of its life. And on a piece of parchment, or some kind of a scroll, the prophet Isaiah recorded the five things Israel needed to remember. In the fashion of a number of scriptural passages, they're written in a chiasmic structure – that's to say the first line is echoed by the last line, the second line by the penultimate line, the third line by the third line from the end, and so on – so the fifth line, the one right in the middle, is the one that really counts. It becomes like the point of an arrow. I want to look at the five things Isaiah tells us, because I've got a hunch they're not just speaking to exiles in the sixth century BC: they're speaking to you and me, right here, right now.

The first thing is, God created you. That's created, not manufactured. Everything manufactured is a product. Everything created is a miracle. Your creation in the womb is like the creation of the world: it's a thing of limitless wonder, complexity, care – a mixture of biology and poetry, a blend of the physical and the spiritual – and it happens not randomly, but for a reason. God made you because God wanted you, and had a job that only you could do. And it says God formed you. So creation wasn't a once-for-all thing: God continues to craft you, like a potter with clay on the wheel, deftly and painstakingly, with wisdom and skill and attention.

Then the second line on the scrap of paper is, God has set you free. This part really goes into the depths of our soul. It says, 'Do not fear.' Everywhere in the Bible people encounter God and they're terrified. They're terrified by God's holiness – but also by their own shortcomings. 'Do not fear' means God sees you, God knows you, God understands you, God forgives you. You don't have to have any secrets from God. You don't have to play your usual games. God's beyond all that, and sees you beyond all that. God has redeemed you. I don't know if you've had the experience of being in a restaurant and you get a bit greedy and the food all costs more than you meant it to and you start the edgy process of asking for the bill and wondering how you'll divide it up; and then your companion comes back from the loo and you find they've already paid. Paid the lot. You feel embarrassed and grateful and relieved all at the same time. God has redeemed you. You've been set free; the wrong you've done is forgiven, the damage you've done God is putting right, the hurt you've inflicted God is healing.

But your fear isn't just that your wrongdoing will catch you out. Your deeper fear is that your life is meaningless, that you have no ultimate significance and belong nowhere. God says, 'I have called you by name, you are mine.' You know how they say a mother can recognise her baby's cry even in a crowded room? That's how God knows you. God made everyone, but regards you as if you were the only one. God has called you by name. When someone remembers your name, you know either they're very special, or you're very special to them. God knows your name. Your real name – not

the one everyone else calls you. Your real and intimate name. And you belong to God. You may feel you've spent your whole life not fitting in – wrong face, wrong time, wrong manners, wrong accent, wrong looks, wrong everything. Now you belong. And belonging in God, you are everywhere at home. Some people say, 'There's always a place for you at my table, always a place on my sofa, always a bed if you're thrown out.' That's what God says. But with God, it's forever. You are mine.

And the third line on Isaiah's parchment is, 'I am with you.' Now notice what this says and what it doesn't say. It doesn't say bad things won't happen. You'll be deluged by seas. You'll be flooded by rivers. You'll be beset by fire. Tragedy, disaster, conflict and defeat will happen. There's no promise here that you'll live a charmed life and nothing will worry your pretty little head. But see what it does say: you'll be deluged by seas: but you'll pass through them, and I'll be with you. You'll be flooded by rivers, but they'll not overwhelm you, and I'll be with you. You'll be beset by fire and flame, but it won't burn you up or consume you, and I'll be with you. You'll face pain, terror, loss, grief, shame, horror, calamity: but I'll be with you. I'll hold your hand. I'll walk with you. I'll be there. I'll never leave you alone. Some while ago I had a very painful surgery and when I came round I was hyperventilating and was convulsed with tears, and the friend who'd accompanied me to the hospital just gave me the most enormous hug. He said nothing, but just enveloped me in sweater and shoulder and everlasting arms. That hug said, 'You've done a hard thing. But I'm here.' It still hurt. But that hug said, 'You're not alone. I'm with you.' I haven't forgotten that hug. I never will. God says, 'I am with you.'

The fourth line on the scrap of paper is more mysterious. It seems to be about God exchanging one people for another. But you don't have to have a scholarly knowledge of ancient near-eastern archaeology to get what it's saying. God says, 'I'll make sacrifices for you. To be with you I'll give up some other important and valuable things. I could be elsewhere, in richer places, more comfortable surroundings, softer touches, easier rides. I know you: to be with you isn't going to be a rose garden. But I'm going to do it anyway.' And in the New Testament that language of 'I'll give up everything for you' takes on a whole new dimension. In Jesus God really does give up everything for us.

And that brings us to the fifth line on the parchment. There's a reason why Isaiah doesn't start here. It's partly a historical reason: what we've read so far more or less works its way through the Old Testament and through the story of Israel: the creation to start with, then the liberation from Egypt, then the covenant on Sinai in which God says I'll be with you, and then the cost of God choosing Israel when Israel is what they call in the north east a worky ticket, like a niggly footballer goading the referee to send him off. But it's partly also a psychological reason: God says, 'I made you, I saved you, I'm with you, I gave up everything for you.' And it begs the question, Why? It's a question that comes out of gratitude, because what God's articulating is grace, totally unearned, unwarranted, undeserved relationship and blessing. It's also a question that comes out of scepticism – why, knowing what I'm like, would anyone say such things to me? What's the catch? What's the let-down at the end of all this glory? So the fifth line is the answer to this suspicious, yet grateful, mystified, yet humble, question, Why am I all these things to you?

And this is God's answer. You can only really do this answer justice if you imagine both parties in tears: you in tears because you've been trembling with a fear and doubt since your first conscious breath, a fear that there was no meaning and a doubt that if there was, you'd be included in it; and God in tears because it takes so many ways and so many times to persuade you and encourage you and show you. Here are the words that are the centre of scripture, the essence of Christianity, the heart of it all: 'Because,' says God to you, 'You are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you.'

The first two words complement each other. 'You are precious' means 'You are of infinite value, you are unique, you are without compare.' 'You are honoured' means 'I respect you, you have your own integrity, there's more to you than simply your relationship with me.' And then, the final word: 'And I love you.' You need all three words. I don't know if anyone's ever told you they love you when it was clear they didn't honour you. It's actually not very nice at all. And to be loved and

honoured is great, but without the 'precious' it makes you feel the person's just being kind. Precious, honoured, loved: you need all three.

And this is where what I earlier called the chiasmic structure of Isaiah's words really works. Because we're all familiar with the phrase 'God loves you,' and how shallow and superficial it can sound. But it's not shallow here, because it's the climax of these five layers of glory; and then those five layers cascade back down in more or less reverse order once we've reached the top of the mountain. This, we see, is where love comes from – and this, we go on to see, is what love entails. To say 'I love you' only means something if it's the last piece in the jigsaw – backed up by actions and faithfulness and promises kept and commitment proved.

So here are the five memory phrases about God, according to Isaiah. I crafted you; I set you free; I'm with you; I gave up everything for you; I love you – so, in reverse order, I gave up everything for you, I'm with you, I saved you, I formed you.

Imagine the shape of this poem as an arrow, with the fifth phrase, 'You are precious, honoured, and loved,' as the point of the arrow. And where is that arrow pointing? It's pointing right at Jesus. At Jesus' baptism the voice from heaven says almost the very same words – 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' Precious, honoured, and loved. And at Jesus' baptism there are the voice and waters and Spirit of creation, the parted river of liberation, the solidarity of Jesus being with us, and these precious and honoured words of love. Jesus' baptism is the performance by God the Holy Trinity of the prophecy of Isaiah 43.

Remember those five declarations that God made to Isaiah, that the voice said to Jesus, and that the Spirit whispers to you. Write them or type them onto paper and seal them on the inside of your soul. Remember them in the scariest moment of your life. They're the heart of it all. You are precious, honoured and loved: now, and forever.