17 March 2019: Choral Matins
The Second Sunday of Lent

Genesis 17:1-7, 15, 16; Romans 11:13-24

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‘St Isaac of Nineveh’

As we continue our Lenten journey in the company of Abraham and Sarah, of St Paul and the apostles, I want to introduce you to one of my great heroes of the faith, St Isaac of Nineveh. This seventh-century bishop may well be someone you’ve not heard much of before. Famed in antiquity for his hard-core asceticism and bodily mortifications, he ate only three small loaves and a handful of uncooked vegetables a week and sang a daily marathon of psalms that would put our Choir to shame; he was a man of huge prowess and wisdom in the spiritual life, which led both to him being made Bishop of Nineveh and to him resigning the role after only five months in order to get back to God.

We might expect him then to be a demanding figure, someone who unrelentingly called Christians to walk the way of the Cross through discipline and hard work. But like Abraham and Paul, Isaac had a deep and abiding mystical experience of the grace of God, of what it means to be chosen and called by the Creator of the Universe who is beyond all our imagining and comprehension.

One of Isaac’s favourite images for his mystic sense of God’s love and compassion is that of a vast ocean, living waters so great that they swallow up every speck of the dust of our sin: “See, Lord, I can no longer keep silent before the ocean of your grace. I no longer have any idea how to express the gratitude that I owe to you.” (Ascetic Treatises 60).

While other contemporary writers focused on God’s holiness as justice, Isaac declares:

“Do not say that God is just . . . David may call him just and fair, but God’s own Son has revealed to us that he is before all things good and kind. He is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked (Luke 6:35). How can you call God just when you read the parable of the labourers in the vineyard and their wages? ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong…I choose to give to this last as I give to you…do you begrudge my generosity?’” (Matthew 20:13).
O the wonder of the grace of our Creator! O the unfathomable goodness with which he has invested the existence of us sinners in order to create it afresh!” (Ascetic Treatises 60)

St Isaac never once denies the reality of sin, never once denies its power over us and the struggle of daily life. What he has though from his mystical experience is an abundance of perspective. He shows us the bigger picture; and, in the face of this, all our normal human calculations around justice and revenge, goodness and forgiveness fail.

“As a handful of sand in the boundless ocean, so are the sins of the flesh in comparison with God’s providence and mercy. As a copious spring could not be stopped up with a handful of dust, so the Creator’s compassion cannot be conquered by the wickedness of creatures.” (Ascetic Treatises 58)

So when it comes to contemplating the nature of hell and divine punishment, we find something rather different from usual. He takes Scripture very seriously, probing every passage. But instead of dividing the world into the elect and the reprobate, the saved and the damned, heaven and hell, Isaac finds, in so many difficult texts and judgements, a clear vision of the God whom he knows from his prayers. A God of Love. Love so strong that it conquers Death and cannot but be “all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28).

To be in heaven or in hell is to be confronted by the God who is Love; to be overwhelmed by his greatness and our littleness. St Isaac is a saint who really got that much pondered Psalm verse: “For with the Lord there is forgiveness, therefore he is to be feared” (Ps. 130.4). It is not the judgement, justice or wrath of God which casts us out into the outer darkness where there is weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth; it is his Love. His Love, all-sovereign, like a consuming fire (Deut. 4:24; Heb. 12:29), before which there is no justification only the grace of relationship.

Isaac is overwhelmed by the in-breaking of God’s compassion into his prayers and daily life; and so he can confidently declare that, “It is absurd to suppose that sinners in hell are deprived of God’s Love. Love…is offered impartially. But by its very power it acts in two ways. It torments sinners, as happens here on earth when we are tormented by the presence of a friend to whom we have been unfaithful. And it gives joy to those who have been faithful. That is what the torment of hell is in my opinion – remorse.” (Ascetic Treatises 84).
There is torment, yes. This is no easy message. However, it is a torment that educates, that purifies, that changes us. It is the action of Love upon the soul. God’s Love will always burn us. It is so alien, so great, so far beyond us; and for anyone who doubts that, for even a second, just contemplate the fullest expression of that Love, in the death of Christ on the Cross. Isaac sees that the choice is not between God and not-God, but between self and not-self. As long as we choose the path of selfishness, the sovereign Love of God, his very forgiveness, will bring us pain, remorse, both in this life and the next, as we more fully understand what we have done. And yet the moment we choose to abandon ourselves in this ocean of grace, this same Love brings joy, peace, forgiveness and hope for all.

So what message does St Isaac the mystic have for us here at Christ Church as we continue our Lenten journey to the Cross? Firstly, pray, pray hard; give yourself over completely to God’s Love, let the tides of his great compassion sweep you out into the deep – abandon yourself. Secondly, never judge others – we may only encourage. Not because there is no sin – no, Isaac knows all too well that there is sin too much! – but because before the face of God there is so little difference between our sins and the sins even of the most evil human being. He tells us instead that the truly compassionate heart “burns for all creation, for the birds, for the beasts, for the devils, for every creature. When he thinks about them, when he looks at them, his eyes fill with tears” (Ascetic Treatises 81). Isaac urges “spread your cloak over anyone who falls into sin and shield them. And if you cannot take their fault upon yourself and accept punishment in their place, do not destroy their character” (Ascetic Treatises 58). And finally, live lives of hope – hope that our sin is really but a handful of sand before the great ocean of divine compassion and all shall be saved – we know not how – as the purifying fire of God’s Love triumphs so completely that he is “all in all”.
