The readings are Isaiah 6: 1-8 & Matt. 13: 10-16

  **Ready to Respond - Eric Liddell & Isaiah**

 This is the last in our series "Ready to Respond" in which we explore the response of a believer to God's call in Scripture to see if there is a parallel to that of a later believer. The film 'Chariots of Fire' gave a heart warming & challenging account of Eric Liddell's response. Isaiah's story of his call is familiar & powerful, though the AV's translation in Is. 6: 1 that the Lord's "train filled the Temple" confused some children-was the Temple a railway station?

 1. Isaiah's call

       a) context-the date-the death of King Uzziah (or Azariah) 791 BC-740BC led to much apprehension about the future, for, though he was counted as a 'good' king of Judah (he followed the Lord's ways), many of his people were morally corrupt, untruthful & exploited the poor. Isaiah was tarnished with this same brush. On the surface, the king was 'good', had (helped by the Lord) defeated the Philistines & Arabs, BUT an act of pride led to his death from leprosy 2 Chron. 26: 16. This disease symbolised that the sufferer was not fit to stand in God's presence, which was true of  Judah's inhabitants including Isaiah.

        b) Isaiah needed to see : the Lord's sovereignty hence the 'train of his robe' & the 'throne' besides the smoke, sound of voices & the thresholds' shaking (v4)-often in Scripture denoting the Lord's presence. The Lord's holiness was proclaimed by the seraphs & His glory or character of blazing purity without sin & love filled the earth Is. 6: 1-4.

         c) Isaiah's response was to be appalled & say 'woe is me. I am ruined' Is. 6: 5. He admitted his sinfulness-he had fallen short of God's standards, like so many other contemporarie,s he was guilty of untruthfulness.

         d) Isaiah forgiven-Is. 6: 6-7. The Lord showed him mercy-his

guilt was taken away & his sin atoned for or covered, so that he could see the Lord without fear, hear his call for someone to speak to Judah & offer willingly to be sent Is. 6: 8.

          e) his task was stark-though the compassionate message he had to take was one of urging the people to 'turn & be healed' by the Lord, his listeners could hear, but could not or would not understand. Is. 6: 9-10. This was so frustrating, difficult & dispiriting that Isaiah asked how long he should persist Is. 6: 11. The reply was even worse. It was to be as long as it took, till Judah was destroyed & its people sent into exile, though there was a glimmer of hope that the Lord would enable a remnant to return. Is. 6: 11-13.

 To sum up: despite all the difficulties, disheartening effect of speaking to people who had tin ears & the ominous nature of the message, Isaiah stayed true to his commission, fulfilled his task & was, above all, loyal to the Lord, for the vision of God's holiness drove him on.

NB In the gospel reading Matt. 13: 10-16 Jesus recognized that he faced the same problem as Isaiah, that his listeners could hear, but could not or would not understand-hence his quotation from that prophet. He explained that He used parables to try to get through  the tin ears. The secrets of the kingdom were unfamiliar &, perhaps, complex to his hearers.Therefore, He used intriguing stories based on every day events to catch their attention, knowing that some might with the help of the Holy Spirit dig deeper to discover the one spiritual truth each parable contained. Thus despite all the difficulties Jesus stayed true to His commission, fulfilled His task & was loyal to His Father.

2. Eric Liddell 1902-45

   a) context of his upbringing. His formative years encouraged his close relationship by faith with Jesus Christ. Till he was 6 he was with his siblings & his parents, who were missionaries in China, where he had been born. Between 6 & 18 he was at Eltham College, a school in South London, for the sons of missionaries. Though separated from his parents (except for two or three occasions when they were home on furlough), which might seem a great deprivation to us, he flourished as a devout Christian & excelled at Rugger, Cricket  & athletics as a sprinter.

    b) The choice facing him in 1920, when he went up to Edinburgh University to read Science. His great athletic prowess could dominate his future &, possibly, bring him fame & fortune, but he chose to use his talents to honour God & was much used as a lead speaker at various meetings held by the Glasgow Students' Evangelistic Union. Many came to hear this great athlete speak.

        The most celebrated moment when he stuck to this choice he had made at Edinburgh came in the Paris Olympics of 1924. The 100m was thought to be his best race, but he withdrew from that, as the heats were held on a Sunday, which should for a Christian be a day of rest. He then trained for the 400m. He was profoundly moved before the race & encouraged when one the team's masseurs gave him a note quoting a slightly garbled version of 1 Sam. 2: 30 " Him that honours me I will honour." Thus, both his coach & the masseur  believed in him & his stance. He was in the outside lane, so could not see if runners were catching him up. He sprinted as fast as he could for the first 200 m & then felt God enabling him to keep it up & see off the other contenders. God honoured him with the Gold medal in a race that he was less good at.

   c) 1925-45 he honoured God by devoting himself to teaching in  northern China as a missionary-hoping to influence the children of rich Chinese to promote Christian values, when they became influential. When asked if he regretted leaving behind fame & glory as an athlete he said "It's natural for a chap to think over all that sometimes, but I'm glad that I'm at the work I'm engaged in now.A fellow's life counts for far more than the other." By 1941, Japanese attacks in northern China forced his wife to return to her parents in Canada with their children,while he moved to help at a more remote rural mission station, where, by 1943, the Japanese interned him. some say he could have been part of an exchange of internees, but he gave up his place to a pregnant woman. If the work before had been hard, it was now even more tough. His Christ like character shone through more & more, as he tried to bring unity & compassion amongst the cliques in the Camp & to engage with & help everyone, young & old, to make the best of their confinement.

When he died in Feb. 1945 from a brain tumour, malnourishment & overwork one inmate wrote "the entire camp, especially its youth, was stunned for days, so great was the vacuum that Eric's death had left." Another said "It's rare indeed that a person has the good fortune to meet a saint, but he came as close to it as anyone I have ever known."

  To conclude, what a tribute! Eric Liddell, despite the seductive  lure of being a celebrated sportsman & all the hardships of his later years, put honouring God first, ***was true to his commission,*** fulfilled his task & was loyal to his Saviour.

     Is there not a challenge for each one of us? I say to myself as much as to anyone else-are we driven on by seeing the holiness, forgiveness & compassion of the Lord? Do we honour Him in the choices we make great or small-even in our declining years?

Andrew Rudolf

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