

SERMON FOR 3RD SUNDAY BEFORE LENT: 5 FEBRUARY 2023 AT WYLYE (based on Isaiah 58: 1-9a, 1Cor.2:1-12 and Matt.5: 13-20)

Getting it right with God

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O God our strength and our Redeemer. Amen

Our readings today make me want to ask the question: are we still not getting it quite right? Do we continue to misunderstand or to simply ignore what it is that will make us righteous in the way God wants? The expression 'selective hearing' comes to mind - you know, when someone hears what they want to hear or interprets it to suit themselves. I can still hear my mother saying "I thought I told you to tidy your room", along with my response - "I did!" And then her counter-response, "I don't call that tidying" - because all I'd done was jam things into already over-stuffed drawers and focused on clearing a path through the debris on the floor. I'd heard and understood the word 'tidy' through my ears and eyes, not hers. And Isaiah is saying something similar in the first reading - the people of Israel understood God's requirements through their perception, not through his. Isaiah's message is that they were still not getting it right.

Just to put the reading from Isaiah into context - a generation of Israelites had endured exile in Babylon, and now the next generation is back in Jerusalem, rebuilding the city and their community. There are power struggles and they have lost sight of what their covenant with God is all about. In their homeland, they are free now to worship God openly, but they focus on ritual and outward shows of piety that serve to impress only those around them. Isaiah makes it clear that they do not impress God! He takes the example of fasting, and says: "Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day, and oppress all your workers". In other words, they piously fast while those who work for them, probably for a pittance, suffer. Yet they whinge about God not taking notice of their pious acts: "Why do we fast but you do not see?". They interpret God's laws on their own terms, choosing to adhere to the letter, but not to the spirit, missing the point somewhat. Paul's letter to the Corinthians also differentiates between the wisdom of humans and that of God. He writes that had the ruling

powers understood God's purpose, they would not have crucified Jesus.

And that in turn brings to mind the Pharisees, who tend to get a bad press, particularly in Matthew's Gospel. Indeed our Gospel reading, part of Jesus' sermon on the mount which repeatedly condemns hypocrisy and false piety, ends with overt criticism of the Pharisees. We heard in today's passage how Jesus makes clear that he does not want to abolish the law, but to accomplish it, to see it lived out fully. So when he adds: "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven", we assume that, like the Israelites in Isaiah, they are falling short, because they misunderstand what God requires of them.

In both Isaiah and Matthew, it seems that people were being criticised for separating their religious from their everyday lives. They compartmentalised: religious observances were strictly kept at specific times, but lost their impact on the rest of their lives. It's as if, by giving time to observing the law of God, they feel they are relieved of the need to strive for a good relationship with anyone else. They think they've done right by God - job done! But Isaiah, speaking on God's behalf, indicates that doing right by God has to involve being in right relationships with other people. He exhorts them to fast, not by giving up food for a day, but by giving up selfish and greedy practices, such as power-grabbing and the smugness of a privileged position. Instead they should "let the oppressed go free, share (their) bread with the hungry and bring the homeless and poor into (their) house".

Matthew's Jesus conveys this message about paying attention to how we relate to others a slightly different way. He tells his listeners to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. What are the properties of salt and light? Salt in the Old Testament wasn't just used for seasoning and preservation. It was also used to ratify covenants; in fact, to eat salt with someone signified a bond of friendship. In the Hebrew world, salt symbolically served to bind people together.

By using the image of salt here, Matthew is doing much the same as Isaiah - encouraging people to look outside themselves and create beneficial relationships with others. Similarly with light - Matthew asks why light a lamp and then proceed to hide it? Matthew's listeners are told to "let your light shine before others", to help light their way to God. And Isaiah, likewise, encourages living with the welfare of others as a focus, so that our "light shall break forth like the dawn". However, the call for us to be the light of the world is not a demand for a vain display of righteousness. Our faith and God's word are for living out and sharing, not for vaunting smugly or keeping to ourselves.

Reflecting on these passages, we might ask ourselves whether our light shines as brightly outside church as it does while we are here; whether our salt loses its strength once we enter the cut and thrust of the 'real' world. If we see our faith-driven lives as a series of boxes to be ticked - ticking boxes being part of so much we do these days! - then coming to church or undertaking church-related activities tick just a very few of them. Those other boxes, the ones that require us to bring God into other people's lives, through kindness and generosity and example, they will be ticked, in the main, away from Sunday services and religious observances. If we want to avoid the mistakes of the Israelites as they rebuilt a religious community in Jerusalem, or of the Pharisees, as they stuck to the letter of the law, then I think our readings today may have told us how: not by simply talking the talk, but through actively caring relationships with others - and that way lies a chance of getting it right with God.

In the name of Christ, amen.