

SERMON – 19/2/23
'Growing Closer to God'

Isaiah 58:1-14

“You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high.” (Isaiah 58:4)

As some of you will be aware this coming week sees the beginning of Lent, a season of preparation for Easter. It is signalled by Shrove Tuesday or Pancake Day when traditionally the remaining fat in the store-cupboard was used up before Ash Wednesday, a day of solemn fasting and prayer and the beginning of 40 days of abstinence, reflecting Jesus' time in the wilderness.

But we're Presbyterians and while traditionally, whether for better or for worse, we haven't made much of the liturgical seasons, in earlier times there were frequently days of prayer and fasting called for from the pulpit for reasons as varied as preparing for communion or facing local or national challenges.

For the most part these days, the furthest most people might be moved to go in the realm of fasting is perhaps to give something up for Lent – often something like chocolate or perhaps the eating of meat or the drinking of alcohol. Fasting is not a big thing in the experience of most of us, and maybe that's something we need to address at some point, because fasting is certainly a theme that runs throughout the Bible and we do well to explore it as a spiritual discipline.

I wonder if you noticed a link in our reading this morning right back to the very opening chapter of Isaiah where the prophet castigated God's people for the emptiness of their religious practices – the bringing of their offerings, the burning of their incense, their festivals and Sabbaths and religious gatherings. Here he returns to the same theme but picks on their sinful rebelliousness in their practice of fasting. Isaiah is by no means alone amongst prophets and preachers across the Biblical revelation, as we'll see, in calling out false religion, but while we are quick to see the faults in the expression of others' Christian faith we are perhaps not so good in seeing the plank in our own

eyes, nor in leaving behind us mere institutional traditionalism and allowing the Spirit of God to draw us closer to the Saviour and to revive in us a living faith.

As so often, the Bible holds out to us two ways to live and calls us to choose God's way over our preferred human alternatives (even those that started as good spiritual practices but somehow got fossilised and emptied of their godliness and power.

First of all here, Isaiah calls us to leave false religion behind and as I've said he uses fasting as his example. It's not that fasting is a wrong thing to do – far from it – but what the people have made of it needs to be challenged because they have twisted it until it has become something very different from what it was intended to be. There is a famous scene in the story of Elijah where he challenges his Canaanite contemporaries to the spiritual equivalent of a duel. There are 450 prophets of Baal but Elijah is the only one of the Lord's prophets left. They are each to offer a sacrifice but once they have prepared it they are each to call on their God to light the fire. The prophets of Baal shout louder and louder for their god to answer them, they dance around the altar all day, they cut themselves until their blood flowed, frantically prophesying but to no avail. When night falls there is still no fire. Elijah, on the other hand, calls for water to be poured on his altar; three times during the day he calls for water; then at the time of the evening sacrifice he calls upon the Lord: "Answer me, LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again." Then the fire of the LORD falls and burns up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licks up the water in the trench and the people fall on their faces crying "The LORD—he is God! The LORD—he is God!"

What Isaiah is saying here is that God's people are treating the practice of fasting in the same way that the prophets of Baal treated their practices of shouting and dancing and slashing themselves as a way of somehow drawing God's attention and getting Him to act instead of the way that Elijah was seeking the honour of God by humbling himself.

'Why have we fasted and you have not seen it?' the people of Isaiah's time cry to God. 'Why have we humbled ourselves and you have not noticed?' (v.3) But Isaiah points out that all the time they have been fasting they have been exploiting their workers, they have been quarrelling and fighting. In the words of our text this morning he says to them: "You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high." (v.4)

The same message is echoed down the ages – by the Old Testament prophets, by John the Baptist and by Jesus who call out the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, by the apostle Paul in Athens who recognises that the people are very religious but that they do not know God, and by the Reformers who called the Medieval Church to repentance from their idolatry and their indulgences. What have we got wrong I wonder? And what do we need to put right in our time? We may be very proud of our traditions and zealous in our religiosity, but what if it's not what God actually wants of us?

Well, thankfully, Isaiah doesn't only point out how the people of his time were getting it wrong, He also points the right way. In place of false religion he offers true faith, and we too are called to take heed to what God says through him.

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?"

Doesn't that just make your heart sing? Doesn't it just make the penny drop as it comes home to you what we read last week that God's thoughts are not our thoughts nor His ways our ways and that we need to let Him change us? Doesn't it just make you think 'Yes' and say 'Amen' and doesn't it just remind you of that voice from the throne on high that Isaiah heard and that people down the ages have also heard: 'Whom shall I send and who will go for us?' until we can say nothing other than 'Here am I, send me!'

Not long after Isaiah was preaching, Micah would lift his voice and say: "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8) Then in time John the Baptist would come urging God's people to 'produce fruit in keeping with repentance.' (Matthew 3:8) And surely Jesus had these words of Isaiah in His mind when He took the parable of the sheep and the goats to its climax: "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'" (Matthew 25:37-40)

The apostle James thunders: "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress." (James 1:27) and in our own lifetime Desmond Tutu said: "When people say that the Bible and politics don't mix, I ask them which Bible they are reading" And organisations like Christian Aid and Tearfund and CATH and Broke not Broken call us out of our comfortable religiosity and challenge us with the crying needs of the oppressed and the burdened, the hungry and the homeless, the naked amongst our own flesh and blood, our fellow human beings.

From start to finish the Bible lays out two ways to live and two only – we are either for Jesus or we are against Him. We can dress up our religion in fancy clothes or honoured traditions if we like but unless we allow what we do in the solitude of our personal devotions and in the fellowship of faith in the Lord's House on a Sunday to have an impact on the words we speak and the actions we take, the attitudes we display and the votes we cast, then we are right back to what Isaiah told us God was saying in chapter 1 – 'Even when you offer many prayers, I'm not listening' (Isaiah 1:15)

But the Bible also holds out to us the earth-shattering vision of God's Kingdom of justice and joy over which Jesus will reign and of which Jesus is calling people like you and me to give the world

a foretaste here and now. The season of Lent is almost upon us and whether or not you intend to mark that by any fasting or abstinence or any specific spiritual devotion, let me ask you to journey towards Easter with a conscious desire and intention to act increasingly in ways that will bring delight to the heart of God and sow seeds of the Kingdom in the world.

In Isaiah's vision there were broken walls to be repaired and homes to be restored in post-exilic Jerusalem. We have a similar task to facilitate today in Turkey and Syria, in Ukraine and in our own broken society.

"You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high," says Isaiah, but he also declares that if we undertake the kind of fasting to which God calls us: "Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I." (Isaiah 58:8-9)