

Sermon 7th August 2022

Bible Reading: Isaiah I: 1, 10-20, Psalm 50 and

Today's reading from Isaiah is a brilliant reading to start our journey together as minister and congregation because this text invites us to ask the following question "what is worship?" How would you answer that?

But before we begin to think that through, a story. When I was beginning my vocation as a lay preacher I wanted to get a bit more experience so I would go and preach at other locations. One morning I drove up to a particular church to lead the service and as I went into the car park I could see out of the corner of my eye I could see one of the church leaders having some sort of disagreement with a security guard. I stayed in my car because I hate confrontation so I thought I should let it blow over. Well it became even more heated. As the two men continued to argue they started to puff up a little bit and they began posturing as if blows punches were about to fly. Fortunately it didn't become physical and once the security guard had left I got out of my car and met the leader at the door of the church. "All of that looked a bit troubling", I said, "that's not a really good way to start the morning, poor you", but what I really wanted to express was my concern for that security guard. He now had an impression of what a Christian is like that he would remember for a very long time. Where were the gifts of the Spirit during the altercation I had witnessed? Where was the patience, kindness, and compassion?

Now the point of my story is not to make any of us think to ourselves "well least we're not as bad that person". The point is to make us all aware that we need to be actively living out our faith and upholding the values we believe in in all circumstances, even if a disagreement starts to get heated. Or if someone cuts us off in traffic or if we are holding a grudge or just having a bad day and taking it out on everyone around us. As the saying goes if we talk the talk we must walk the walk; if we don't we are... hypocrites.

So is worship an hour on Sunday making sure we say all the right prayers and work through all the correct liturgy, is it about praying every morning and evening, is it attending bible study regularly or being out there doing good deeds? When we read through the OT text today we can see that the people were fantastic at ritual worship. They attended every festival with diligence, and I can imagine the temple overflowing with worshippers, perhaps it was standing room only; a little bit different to church today. However despite that we hear God question the people asking them "what right have you to recite my statutes, what right do you have to speak about our covenant relationship, for you hate discipline and you cast my words behind you." The people are saying one thing, upholding God's ways in principle but then acting as if God has no influence over their behaviour. They are being hypocrites.

We are told by historians that Isaiah is speaking to God's people after a recent invasion of the Assyrian army. Apparently they were very fortunate not to have been wiped out and so just before our lectionary text today in verse nine the people say to themselves "aren't we blessed; God did not allow us to be wiped out, there are still some of us left. At least we're not like those evil cities, Sodom, and Gomorrah, wiped out entirely by God because of their wickedness and cruelty. The next words out of the prophet's mouth are like a slap in the face. In verse 10 Isaiah calls them Sodom and names them Gomorrah; the

prophet is saying “hang on a minute, you are just like the people of those wicked and evil towns.’ Looking around to find someone worse than ourselves, someone committing worse sins, to make ourselves feel better is nothing new it seems. The better way is to be alert to the ways in which we fail to live up to the values of our faith.

Now let’s begin to unpack the characteristics of true worship. It clearly isn’t just an hour on Sunday or observing all the rituals. In Romans 12, Paul encourages us to offer ourselves as a “living sacrifice holy and pleasing to God this is your true and proper worship”. Being a living sacrifice is a 24/7 continual process; our Christian faith is not something we put on and off like a jacket or open and then close when it suits us.

Now what if we look at ourselves, really look at ourselves and think, “well I can never be a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, I’m just too selfish, too broken, too old, too young, too busy, too ‘over it”. Friends, the good news is that despite our failings, despite our tendency to avoid true worship, God is constantly reaching out to us and offering us the kingdom. Right throughout Israel’s history they continually get it all wrong. Are we better than them at following God, do you think? No, they are just like us, they are on a journey, they are learning to seek God, learning to seek justice, learning to trust and obey. Like God’s first people we are continually given the opportunity to start afresh and leave the past errors behind us. This is grace. Jesus tells us in the gospel today (Luke 12:32) that God is pleased to give us the kingdom. Right here right now, it is not a distant shore, where crystal seas break upon some heavenly landscape. No, God wants us to come to him and receive the kingdom and uphold all its values today, but God won’t force us, God can’t push his love onto us and pin us down until we give in. In Psalm 50 which is full of dire warnings and consequences the people will face if they don’t change their behaviours, God still reaches out with love, saying, “come to me in times of trouble,” I will be there, and you will praise me. This urging, all most desperate desire of God to bombard all people with immeasurable grace and love is fully and finally revealed in Jesus, because he came not to condemn us but to save us from our often miserable, mean, irritable or just plain lost selves. Jesus came to save us from being people distanced from God. Jesus came so that we could learn how to grow into being the people of God’s realm. Jesus came to be like us so that we can become like him. May God bless us all in our journey towards Christlikeness.

Amen.