

Lent 3 – Isaiah chapter 58, verses 1 – 14:- (This is an Old Testament Reading for Ash Wednesday)

This chapter is first of a series of ‘Sermons’ which make up the last 9 chapters of the Book of Isaiah. Firstly notice that this message is to the People of God! Throughout their history they had proof of the ongoing guidance and loving care of the Lord God. At the time of the prophet Isaiah the leaders and people in Judah continued to claim privilege as ‘the People of God’ whilst ignoring his commands. They were proud to claim their special relationship with the Lord God “*the first and great commandment*” but ignored the second - “*You shall love your neighbour as yourself*” see Matthew chapter 22, verses 35 – 40. These commandments should have been well known at the time of Isaiah as they were clearly set out in the ‘Books of Moses’ - see Deuteronomy chapter 6, verses 4 - 5 and Leviticus chapter 19, verse 18.

There is an old fashioned word which was ignored at the time of Isaiah and is sadly ignored in many quarters today. That word is **Integrity**. Summed up sometimes by ‘doing the right thing even if nobody is looking’! Do our actions as a church and as Christians reflect that which we believe?

Isaiah chapter 58, verses 1 – 3a: - As already noted this is a prophetic word to the People of God. The people are acting as though they are living righteous lives, knowing the right way to live but they have forsaken the “*ordinance of their God*” (verse 2). Notice that they ‘enjoy’ their worship! In verse 3 they question why they do not get the expected result from their worship. Compare this scenario with that described by the Lord Jesus in Luke chapter 18, verses 9 – 14. a right attitude when approaching the Lord God in worship is essential.

Verses 3b – 5:- It appears that the people who were supposedly ‘fasting’ were making it into a ‘free for all’ holiday. A fast day could have provided food for the poor and needy (food banks are the modern version!). It could have provided time for believers to look round at their poorer neighbours and see if any practical help was required. Instead it appears they were partying in their high class homes and getting into drunken brawls in public.

The outward appearance of humility and self-abasement was there on public display. Remember though “ . . . *for the Lord sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.* ” - 1 Samuel chapter 16, verse 7.

Verses 6 – 7:- these verses show the practical outworking of the second great commandment “*you shall love your neighbour as yourself*”. The principle of the Year of Jubilee was set out for the people of God in Leviticus chapter 25. Here the prophet is saying that the actions which were to take place at the Jubilee should be applied at time of fasting. The poor and needy should not have to wait for 40 or even 50 years for help from their brethren!

Verses 8 – 9a:- These are the positive blessings that will follow from the reality of putting the commandments of the Lord God into effect.

Verses 9b – 14:- Notice the two ‘conditional statements’ verses 9b – 10a and verse 13. These are followed by two statements setting out the results, verses 10b – 12 and verse 14.

Remember that this is Old Testament theology! There is no way that we can earn the right to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. However the need to show our faith by the example of the way we live our lives is just as necessary now as it was at the time of Isaiah.

Remember, don’t just ‘give up’ something during Lent! Rather make it a time to ‘give out’. A regular gift to the local Food Bank is one option. Give to the Earthquake appeal. My mother would say “There is always someone worse off than yourself!”