

Homily for 18th February 2026 – Year A – Ash Wednesday

Preached at St Serf's Shettleston and St John's Baillieston

Isaiah 58:1-12

Sermon

It is hard to imagine that anyone reading a passage like the one from the book of the prophet Isaiah could then turn around and say that Christianity is just about getting saved for heaven, and nothing to do with social justice. And yet, throughout the West, many Christians will read or hear this and still somehow decide that their faith is mostly about keeping various cultural religious rules, believing all the right things, and attending church on Sundays. They'll sometimes even hold to a firm belief that anyone living on the streets, or going hungry because of debt, or living in a hotel while trying to claim asylum, must be someone that is undeserving of help, someone who is a moral failure, someone whom God disapproves of.

Chapter 58 of the book of Isaiah is part of what scholars call 'Third Isaiah', which refers to the last few chapters of the book that were written after the return from exile in Babylon, but before the rebuilding and rededication of the temple in 515BC. They're clearly not written by the original Isaiah, who was writing 200 years earlier, but are more likely part of an Isaiah tradition preserved by a school of disciples.

In any case, this new 'Isaiah' has no qualms in setting his sights on religious pietists who are rigorously performing acts of public devotion and fasting, such as we might do in Lent with ash crosses on our foreheads and giving up various foods, but who have failed to realise that such acts are worthless in God's eyes if they are not also accompanied by a commitment to social justice – the ending of hunger, violence, oppression and homelessness in our communities.

In the Ancient Near East, the point of fasting was to influence your god to act on your behalf, perhaps to ease a drought, or defend against military invasion, or heal an illness, or obtain economic benefits. It was primarily a selfish activity – I'll do this for God, so that God does that for me – or at best something done to benefit the nation you were dependent on. And the elites would compete to show off their piety.

This prophet Isaiah gives voice to God crying out against this narrowminded selfishness. It's not that the people have forgotten their religion, says God; in fact, they're incredibly zealous in fasting and humbling themselves and reading the scriptures. But they're doing all these things to be noticed by God and one another. "Look how holy and righteous I am!"

God through Isaiah immediately points out their hypocrisy: 'You serve your own interests and oppress all your workers, even while you're fasting and trying to win my favour. You quarrel and fight even as you show off how supposedly repentant you are.'

And then God redefines what fasting truly means, from an act of refraining from food to a selfless focus on practical and meaningful justice for everyone within a community, even if they are from other lands or cultures, or simply look different.

"Is not this the fast that I choose:" says God, "to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke. Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?"

It's worth repeating that God is always a God of justice and peace for all peoples, not just the ones who can fit into the dominant cultural mould and provide for their own needs. Doing the right thing means working to end oppression in our

communities, stopping pointing fingers of blame and waving fists of anger at people not-like-us, and resisting the temptation to spread self-righteous malicious hatred on social media, what Isaiah calls the “speaking of evil.”

If only you would “offer food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,” then there will be blessings for you,” says God. Then our “light shall rise in the darkness, and our gloom will be like the noonday.” This was the original point of Judeo-Christian religion – to become a blessing to all peoples. And yet, what country wants to be a blessing these days? Many wealthy nations fear and mistrust outsiders so much they want to nurture a ‘hostile environment’ to put people off coming for help and sanctuary. They want to leave human rights conventions so that they have the freedom to be more cruel and even less welcoming to those seeking refuge. In case anyone is in any doubt, this is not the fast that God chooses. God wants you to offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted.

And yet still, the leaders of many Christian nations think they have the moral high ground and are exemplifying the best of their religion as they try to make their country as unwelcoming and unhelpful as possible to the various powerless minorities they can blame everything else on. ‘No,’ says God to Isaiah. “Shout out; do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins.” This is why for one day each year we wear the mark of our sins and failures on our foreheads in a public act of repentance – not to show off our piety, but to remind ourselves of how far we still are from the people God calls us to be.

Lord, have mercy on our hypocrisy, and our selfishness. Give us courage to break all injustice, feed the hungry, and set the oppressed free.