



This morning we hear again this theme weaving its way through our readings.

From Isaiah, important issues are raised concerning the relationship between worship and social justice. It seems that Isaiah was speaking to the upper classes of Judah. The common people could not have afforded the expensive offerings at the frequent festivals. Therefore, it was the wealthy and the powerful of society that the strong words of the Lord are targeted. Reference to them as “rulers of Sodom” and “people of Gomorrah” represented judgement and destruction as well as indicating their sinfulness.

“What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?  
says the Lord;  
I have had enough of burnt-offerings of rams  
and the fat of fed beasts;  
I do not delight in the blood of bulls,  
or of lambs, or of goats.

When you come to appear before me,  
who asked this from your hand?  
Trample my courts no more;  
bringing offerings is futile;  
incense is an abomination to me.  
New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—  
I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.  
Your new moons and your appointed festivals  
my soul hates;  
they have become a burden to me,  
I am weary of bearing them.  
When you stretch out your hands,  
I will hide my eyes from you;  
even though you make many prayers,

I will not listen;  
your hands are full of blood.  
Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;  
remove the evil of your doings  
from before my eyes;  
cease to do evil,  
learn to do good;  
seek justice,  
rescue the oppressed,  
defend the orphan,  
plead for the widow.” (Is. 1:11-17)

The ritual practices rejected is extensive. The prophet first hears the Lord rejecting various kinds of sacrifices – “burnt offerings of rams, the fat of fed beasts, the blood of bulls, lambs and goats.” The disapproval of “offerings”, extended to encompass incense as well as all forms of religious celebration and assembly, including regular and unscheduled services of worship. Here, we sense the Lord’s problem with religious observances expressed with deep irony: “I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity” (Is. 1:13). Verse 14 repeats and underscores the Lord’s repudiation of religious festivals: “Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates.” Perhaps the most radical announcement of all comes in verse 15 with the rejection of prayer itself. The stretching out of ones hand was a posture of prayer. And so the reason for the Lord’s refusal to hear makes the ironic rejection in verse 13 plain: “When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make

many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.” The image of bloody hands is a metaphor for unspecified acts of violence.

The body of this reading gives a graphic statement about the pointlessness and the disgrace of worship when the lives of worshippers are wrapped up in injustice. Isaiah pointed out that people’s life in the temple had a bearing on their life in the rest of society and vice versa. Their religious life had a bearing on their community life too; their devotion to God was also to be reflected in their devotion or concern for their neighbour and vice versa. The two went hand in hand.

It would be a mistake to try and drive a wedge between piety and social action; between the life of prayer and worship, on the one hand, and intervention on behalf of the disadvantaged and oppressed, on the other hand. The text does not force a decision for one and against the other. It seems unlikely that Isaiah himself ever put aside ritual. He was in the Temple when he had the vision of the Lord’s justice (chapter 6). Even more, Israel’s songs of worship constantly emphasise the link between piety and concern for equality in society. For example, the liturgies for entrance into the Temple make this clear in psalm 15:1-2: “O Lord, who may abide in your tent? ... Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right” (see also psalm 24). Therefore, fundamental to coming into the presence of the Lord is

living a life of obedience to the Lord's will to do justice in one's daily life.

This didn't mean that one had to be perfect to be able to worship God. But in addressing the worship practices of some people, Isaiah was in effect asking, "what's really important here; where is the real focus?" Was it about God or themselves? And how did one's love for God include love for others? The extravagance in presenting a "multitude" of sacrifices at the expense of the disadvantaged like widows and orphans suggests that, for some, mainly the rich and powerful, their worship was more about themselves. What seemed more important to them were their own interests. Therefore, their religious practices reflected a kind of self-righteousness that revealed where their heart or faith really was – in their own possessions and status.

Jesus said that "where your treasure is, there your will be also" (Lk. 12:34). But he taught that our response to God was not grounded in selfishness. After telling the parable of the rich fool, Jesus encouraged his followers that life in God kingdoms was more than concerns about one's own life. Instead of worrying or striving anxiously about basic human needs, they should strive first for the kingdom of God (Lk. 12:31). Jesus wasn't suggesting the people shouldn't care about what they needed to survive; rather he spoke

about these things in the context of the person who said to Jesus, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me” (Lk. 12:13). This led on to the telling of the parable of the rich fool. The words of Jesus were addressed to persons who already had enough food to eat and clothes to wear and yet spent their lives worrying and trying to acquire more and more.

But for those who seek first the kingdom of God, Jesus assures them that it is God’s “good pleasure to give” it to them (Lk. 12:32). The disciples are assured of both God’s care for their needs and the certainty that the kingdom will finally declare God’s reign in their lives. It is a reign whereby their response to God is reflected in their response to others: “Sell your possessions and give alms to the poor” (Lk. 12:33). Whereas the standard of the world encourages one to look after one’s own interests and welfare, Jesus said the kingdom of God requires one to show compassion to those less fortunate, as in the case of the Good Samaritan. Whereas the mindset of the rich fool considered material things to be of greatest value, Jesus said that real wealth included a God-dimension to one’s life where the focus is no longer on self. Instead of a life worrying about our own needs, Jesus says that helping to provide for the needs of others will mean we don’t have to worry about ourselves.

Is that being irresponsible? Can we really look at helping others while not caring about our own situation? Are we really expected to be that sacrificial as followers of Jesus? Perhaps it's easier said than done. But if there are only two basic impulses, either to grasp or to give, then the alternative to anxiety over what we do not possess or control is to release our grasp of that which we do control. According to the economy in the kingdom of God, Jesus said if we lose our life, we will gain it. Just as the first will be last and the last will be first, those who humble themselves (including laying down what they have) will be lifted up. In the kingdom of God, a person's real life and value is seen in their loving response to God and others. As they have received the kingdom by God's good pleasure, so they are also to give in compassion to meet the needs of others less fortunate. "Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Lk. 12: 33-34).

In my mind, this "unfailing treasure" is the sincere love summed up in the heart of the law – "love God, your neighbour and yourself." This is the true worship that can be practiced or expressed in both religious ritual and everyday living. Love for God, neighbour and self becomes a lifestyle that permeates every area of one's life. It is something that enriches a person's life in every respect whereby love

and justice is demonstrated consistently and does not become hypocritical. This kind of faith cannot, therefore, express love of God and at the same time oppress others (as seen in Isaiah).

We are encouraged that as we invest this treasure of love in the kingdom of God, it will reveal where our heart really is. It will reveal what is most important in our life. Our worship is our loving response to God and others. As we strive for the kingdom of God, we have a hope for the fulfilment of all that God's kingdom holds for us. This faith and hope, according to Hebrews 11:1 (The Message Translation), "makes our life worth living." This is what enriches our life. Our faith or hope in God is precious because it is based upon God's reign or rule of love and justice. It is a faith whereby a person seeks to good and right by God and others.

Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." In other words, you will give priority to what is more important to you. So, where is your heart? As far as your faith and belief system goes, where and in what are you putting your time and effort? Is your striving for the working out of love and justice? Sure we can express our love of God in our worship services and in activities of various church organisations, but how does our expression of love and justice extend to people both in and outside of the church?

We do not always get it right as Christians. Sometimes our religious activities do not always translate into loving and doing right to others. Jesus encourages us to not allow our faith in loving God and others to “wear out” (Lk. 12:33). Instead, we must keep our focus upon the hope and trust that God continues to work through us in spite of ourselves and our circumstances. This is because it is God’s good pleasure, none-the-less to give us the kingdom “where no thief can come near and no moth destroys. Amen.