

Sunday 5th Feb 2017 Right actions or acting right?
Isaiah 58:1-9a and Matthew 5:13-20

The thing that I most loved about being a primary school teacher was watching the pupils learn and grow and develop. Over the period of a school year there were great changes that took place with individual children, and with the class. There was something especially rewarding when one of the children suddenly 'got it!' That light bulb moment. And there was the recognition, at the end of a term or the end of the year, when I could sit back and see just how much the children had developed. I have loved watching the children come to Messy Mondays. They have been coming for less than 5 months but we can see changes in them. There are 2 little girls who I have noticed especially who have become more confident, whose language has developed, who will come and engage in an activity without the 'safety' of their mum or carer being right beside them. I love seeing them grow into more of the potential that God has placed within them.

And I love that about our Christian journey. I love learning more about what God has for us and I love watching how, when we really connect with God, we can see him transform us and our community.

And that is what I think is at the heart of these 2 passages that we have heard this morning. I think they put flesh on the 2 greatest commandments... to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and mind, and to love our neighbour as ourself. Love is an action and the readings from Isaiah and Matthews gospel teach us how we should be acting, behaving, loving God and our neighbour.

Let's take a look at them and hopefully you will see what I mean.

Right actions or acting right?

In the first few verses of the Isaiah reading we can see how the people of Israel, God's chosen people are making the right actions

We read they are seeking God

delighting to know his ways and draw near to Him

asking Him for righteous judgements

They are fasting and humbling themselves

They are following the religious requirements and making right actions

But they are puzzled, questioning because despite following the requirements, they think God does not see them or take any notice of them. And they ask Him why?

Look what God says in response... He HAS seen and he HAS heard and so He replies

You fast but you serve your own interests

You fast but you fight and quarrel

You bow your heads and wear sackcloth but for what purpose?

He sees their right actions BUT He also sees their hearts, their motives

and He sees their actions more as pious ritual, more as religious observance than as acting right with hearts of love and compassion.

Their right actions are meaningless because they are divorced from acts of justice. Their actions are motivated by looking right rather than by love from the heart.

Their actions are not resulting in what they want because maybe they are going through the motions as a ritual rather than responding to Gods love for them and acting out of love and mercy.

Maybe the salt has lost its saltiness!

In the week I saw a strange headline... I think on the BBC news website.... that maybe we should have 2 bins in our bathrooms!!

What on earth has this got to do with this mornings message I hear you cry! Well

The reason given for the suggestion of 2 bins was that after some extensive research!! Whilst people have got much better at recycling plastic bottles in general, we are not good at recycling the empty plastic bottles of bathroom cleaning materials, shampoo, shower gel etc. And the thinking is that if we had a recycling bin for such things in the bathroom, rather than just the usual place of the kitchen, then we may be better at recycling these containers !!

My thinking is that maybe for some of us, recycling is a ritual, an observance. We know we should and so we do generally recycle. But we don't bother, or forget, when it is a little less convenient. But for those people who are passionate about our environment, and therefore passionate about recycling, they will go to all lengths to recycle everything, even when it needs a bit more effort. Why? Because it is out of love for the environment and not an observance that they think is right and a good thing to do.

In both our readings there is a challenge to us, not for right actions but acting right. God is challenging the people of Israel through the prophet Isaiah, as He does the Scribes and Pharisees through the words of Jesus. In Matthews gospel we read how Jesus challenges the public piety and adherence to the Law saying that is not enough to enter the Kingdom!

Let's go back to Isaiah though

God does not say do not fast. But He says that the type of fasting he wants is different.

He wants to see their fasting result in practical outreach to those in need

the oppressed hungry homeless naked their own kin

God wants their fasting to be transformative. He wants the outcome of their fasting to lead to acting right, for it to result in sharing with those in need, not just in them looking good because they have observed the rituals.

There is a clear call in these verses to worship in a way that leads us to care for the hurting, to share with the poor, listen to the lonely, not avoid those who are in need.

In fact... to be salt on the earth and light in the world.

In my reading this week it said that salt has the ability to elicit goodness - we put salt on food to draw out the flavours, or use salt water to help clean a wound. But if it loses its saltiness then obviously it doesn't have these qualities. And as followers of Jesus, should be salty have the ability to elicit goodness too but we lose that saltiness when we forget what we are here for and cease to engage in social justice.

To live justly is an expression of our worship of God, coming from a response to God's love and mercy to us.

Acting right not just making right actions.

In verses 8&9 of Isaiah we can read what the visible outcomes of fasting God's way will be

Is this not the fast that I choose.....

Then your light shall break forth there will be new life

your healing shall spring up

there will be security

your vindicator in front and Lord behind

and there will be a free flowing relationship with God you will cry and I will answer

Just as I loved seeing the children in school grow and develop and mature so God loves to see us grow and develop and mature

Our Christian faith is not something static but something life giving and transformative

When I was training as a teacher, one of the lecturers said to us 'When you think you have reached the summit of teaching it is time to give up.' In other words... when teaching there is always something more to learn, as teachers we were never to think that we had it nailed and knew all there was to know. Boy - wasn't that proved right!

And that is true for our Christian journey too. If we think that we have it nailed, that we have it all sorted, then we are in for a big surprise :-)

We can know a lot about the Christian faith but so can teachers teaching about it in RE

We can do a lot of right things

But what God wants to be different for us as Christians is that He wants us to let our faith change us.

Drawing alongside people, sharing with the poor, listening to the lonely, spending time with those in need will change us.

As the one seeking God responds to the needs of another

 So God will respond to the one who is seeking.

These 2 passages of scripture are fantastic. They are beautiful. They are well known. And they are a challenge.

How do our times of collective worship, here in church on Sundays and Tuesday mornings connect with our community all week?

Do we connect our worship of God in church with our neighbour or our community?

Sometimes it is easy to; sing hymns but not engage our hearts, to hear Scripture but not listen for God, to give an offering but not offer ourselves.

To grow and develop and be transformed by God we need to trust Him, listen to Him and offer all of ourselves to Him and that can be costly but He will respond to us when we do that and lead us into the fullness of life that He intends for us.

A couple of weeks ago I talked about this year holding the possibility of an adventure for us all, together with God. Maybe this is part of that adventure.

We sang in our first hymn 'set our hearts on fire' 'flood the nations with grace and mercy'

Let us trust in the God who loves us to set our hearts on fire for Him today and may we be ready to be used by Him in heartfelt acts of justice, so that the nations may be flooded with His grace and mercy. AMEN

Go in peace,

and may the God of light

illuminate your path and shine forth from you;

may the God of salt

flavour and preserve you and bring hope to life through you;

indeed may the God of love

the Father, the Son, and The Holy Spirit - abide in you and

take flesh through you in our world,

both now and forevermore. Amen