

True Justice Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, Feb. 6, 2011: Isaiah 58:1-9a, Matthew 5:13-20

About five hundred years before Jesus' time, the people of Israel were allowed to return to their homeland after a half-century of exile in Babylon. It should have been a glorious time, but it was not. In fact, it was a time of bitter disappointment and anxiety. They had expected the dawning of the kingdom of peace and plenty that the believed God would establish when the people were gathered back to the promised land. What they found was anything but. People already living in the area were hostile. The Temple had been destroyed, Jerusalem was in ruins, the streets were filled with rubble. They were surrounded by desolation; many were in poverty. It would have looked a lot like Port-au-Prince in Haiti does right now.

This morning's reading from the Hebrew Bible was written at that time; it is from a part of the Book of Isaiah called Third Isaiah. In the passage we hear how people who were struggling to resettle in and around Jerusalem sought God's favour: they fasted, they bowed down, they prostrated themselves in sackcloth and ashes. And they asked God: Why don't you see this? Why don't you notice how we worship you and humble ourselves before you? (Is. 58:2-3a)

Five centuries later, Jesus stood on a mountainside in Galilee and told the crowds that unless they were more righteous than the scribes and the Pharisees, they would never enter the kingdom of heaven. (Mt. 5:20) That would have shocked the people listening to him. The scribes were among the religious elite; the Pharisees were icons of righteousness. They were rigorous in trying to do everything the Torah required; they were meticulous in avoiding anything that would make them morally unclean in the eyes of God. And Jesus was saying: That's not good enough! His followers must have been thinking the same question that they asked another time when Jesus challenged them like this: "Who then can be saved?" (Mt. 19:25)

On that other occasion, Jesus answered that it is impossible for human beings by themselves, but that for God everything is possible. (Mt. 19:26) That does not mean God does it all for us. It *is* by our faith that we are saved, but Jesus does make it clear that he means us to practice what he preaches. (Mt.7:26) In the Gospel reading today he says that every letter of the law is in force until all God's plan is accomplished. (Mt. 5:17-18)

So what is it that God requires us to do? As spoken by Third Isaiah, this is God's answer:

"Is this not the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs 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?" (Is. 58:6-7)

This is social justice, for sure – we hear than message over and over again throughout the Bible - but it is much more than that!

To be fair to the Pharisees and the religious people of Third Isaiah's time, almsgiving was one of those rules they were expected to follow, and no doubt most of them did. But ultimately Jesus and Isaiah were talking about more than that.

And in today's secular society, concerns for the poor, weak and oppressed are reflected – even if inadequately! - in social safety nets and human rights laws. Social work is involved and so is politics, but what Isaiah and Jesus were talking about is different from that, more than that.

I think it is about relationships: relationships with God and relationships with each other as children of God.

Listen again to the words that Isaiah attributes to God: “Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house?” When we talk about sharing bread or “breaking bread together”, we usually mean something more than giving someone food. The food is an absolutely essential part of it, but it also means entering into an immediate relationship with that person, connecting with them in a very personal way. And making them guests in our own house takes that even further, even to the point of making ourselves vulnerable.

And consider the last part of that sentence, challenging the people “not to hide yourself from your own kin”. Reconciliation within families is surely part of that, but I think it goes further: It is about opening ourselves to others, taking down the barriers that divide us from other members of the family of God. The people of Judah wanted to humble themselves to God; God wanted them to humble themselves to one another.

It is in that relationship with others, in God, that real justice is rooted. Professor Amy Oden, who writes about Christian history and hospitality, says that, “The people individually and corporately cannot have a full relationship with God without a just relationship with each other”.¹

That is where the righteousness of the Pharisees fell short. They avoided and excluded people they considered unworthy and unclean. They strove for a right relationship with God in their own interests, but the scriptures teach us that God wants us to strive for the interests of others, especially those lost and broken others who were the very ones the Pharisees pushed away.

In a really fascinating little book called *God’s Economy*, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove writes about his own experiences of encountering the poor, and in exploring ways of living where people share resources and build relationships with the poor. Wilson-Hartgrove and his wife live in a Christian community where people share a house and contribute part of their income to the common fund, and they actually live out some of the thing that Third Isaiah wrote about: they invite people living in poverty share meals in their home, and they have a spare room where homeless people can stay.² Not many of us are ready or able to enter into that kind of living arrangement, and intentional communities such as that don’t always work. Wilson-Hartgrove himself writes about the challenges, but it points toward ways of living that reflect what the prophets and Jesus himself taught.

In the Gospels Jesus teaches that we are not to store up treasures for ourselves on earth, that we should not worry about whether we’ll have food and clothing. He even tells a parable where God calls a man a fool for building barns to store a harvest to support himself in the future. This is a gospel of abundance. We do not have to store up for ourselves, because we will have enough of what we need, when we need it. How can this be?

¹ Amy Oden. “Commentary on First Reading” Working Preacher website (www.workingpreacher.org). Feb. 2011)

² Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove. *God’s Economy; Redefining the Health and Wealth Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 124, 132

Well (just to be clear) it has nothing to do with bank accounts being miraculously filled because someone has said the right prayer or made the right donation. God could certainly make that happen if God chose to do so, but that is not what Jesus was talking about.

He was talking about investing in relationships with others. Imagine a world where all people really do love their neighbours as themselves, and make sure that their neighbours always have what they need. That is the gospel of abundance. Building those kingdom relationships with others what Jesus goes on to teach about in the Sermon on the Mount after telling the crowd that they have to be more righteous than the Pharisees to be saved.

Those who are not poor (or at least do not consider themselves to be poor) have much to learn from those who are poor, and it can happen only through relationships. Oh, we can read reports and statistics and watch documentaries, but it is only through connections between people that real learning can happen. It can be difficult: the poor show us truths that can be uncomfortable. We see how things in our society are not working the way we would like to believe they do. Sometimes we recognize how our own mistakes and failings have contributed to that. We feel helpless in the face of conditions we know are wrong, but do not know how to change. Seeing the visible weakness and brokenness of others may remind us of brokenness that we keep hidden in ourselves. We are reminded of how truly vulnerable and utterly dependent we all are on God and on one another. And we get to know the people who are poor as fully human children of God that and begin to build bridges cross the lines of poverty and wealth.

To do that we have to go to where the poor are. If there was any doubt about that, we need only remind ourselves of the example of Jesus himself, come to live among us and going out to the poor and marginalized of his day.

And I am so grateful to see signs of that happening. Let me mention just two – there many others but these come to mind because they are recent. On Friday night, our Community Meals volunteers served dinner to eighty-some people, and it was wonderful to watch the volunteers engaging with the guests. It is a step along that path of reaching out and connecting. And another is the Same World Same Chance project that we supported through our lasagna lunch a couple of weeks ago. Marissa Izma is living and working directly with the people of an extremely poor village – really as their servant - to help them bring a school to their community.

And I would like to tell you something about how you have helped that happen.

After the lunch, Marissa's father, Mike, told me that when Marissa and Kimberly had first started the project, they began to doubt they could do it. Did they have the abilities? Would anyone believe in them and take them seriously. According to Mike, what made the difference, what kept them going at a time when they were forward was the support they received here from St. James'. It is truly amazing how, by little more than affirmation and encouragement to those who are called to serve, we can make a difference.

May we continue, with God's help, to become a light to the community, and a source of hope to the poor, the lonely, and the oppressed of this world.

The Rev'd Tom Patterson