

7th August 2022

Isaiah 1: 10-20 Hebrews 11; 1-3

Hand in Hand

One of the most important elements of our Protestant non-conformist tradition is our relationship with the Bible, and the gift of discernment. What does the written word mean to us today, in the light of the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus? This became very important in my life during the years of dictatorship in Argentina, when reading the Bible and the newspaper led to the way we would live as Christians, even when not everyone shared this approach. For some the written word became more important than the lived words of Jesus.

Having grown up in a country where the Roman Catholic church was the state church, I enjoy the more relaxed attitude of the Catholic Church here in UK, having lived in a region where protestant churches are small this has allowed them to express themselves free of state constraints. This is why I am particularly worried of the attitude of the churches that seek state patronage and impose their views on the wider society. This is the first “hand in hand” approach I want us to focus on.

The second “hand in hand” approach is that which we learn from the two bible readings this morning. The prophet, speaking at a historical time for the people of Israel, sometime in the eighth century BCE, a time of national crisis, and clearly in vs 1 we read that that what is to follow is addressed to both Judah and Jerusalem, and soon we read (vs 2) that they are compared to Sodom and Gomorrah – which we know is not a good comparison. Isaiah speaks in the name of God and communicates that God sees a moral brokenness and the un-avoidable consequences to this collapse.

The reading from the prophet today is one that has a lot to say of the practices that the people have taken up, which God does not accept, and in many ways could have been written a few days ago: God has had enough of all the burnt offerings, the fat of beasts, the blood of bulls because they have become the sign of economic wealth and power, not of devotion. Only the rich can pay for such sacrifices. God calls them abominable and futile and gets to the point of pointing out that “hands raised in worship are full of blood” -not the blood of sacrifices, but the blood of the poor, the vulnerable... Is there a way forward from this? This is where the reading of Hebrews comes in – written in the first half of the first century of the CE to strengthen the values of the community of believers which seem to be returning to the Jewish practices. The letter sets Jesus as the centre of faith and life.

The closing of the reading of Isaiah opens up a door of hope, because even when rejecting all this, God does not close life to new possibilities: *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.* God is inviting the leaders to a change of heart and change of life – because these go “hand in hand”. All this is summed up with the possibility of “eating from the good of the land”.

We live in a world of much pain, of injustice, of hatred, of discrimination, of economic accumulation in the hands of few and the suffering of many. Clearly much goes on that is not what God wills. This reading reminds us that the relationship with God is broken by the breaking down of the relationship with our neighbours. Jesus will reaffirm the importance of this connection, when in Matthew 22 he sums up the law: *'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind' and 'Love your neighbour as you love yourself.'* These will always go "hand in hand".

The care for the poor, the orphan, the widow, the foreigner/refugee...are central to the Old Testament, as we see in Isaiah today, and they are taken up by Jesus as central to what he does and says; they have become the "1+1=2" of our faith, and yet as we see to what happened to Jesus, and in history, people have been put to death because of those values, by people who don't accept those values, those who believe that "1+1=5".

To love God means also loving one's neighbour, so our piety and our social responsibility will always go "hand in hand". And this is so necessary in times as these, not only in those countries we pray for often but also in our country today. As Pope Francis said in a recent interview - *"We do not come out from a crisis on our own: we need to take risks and take each other's hand"*

So when the letter to the Hebrews defines faith, it does so on these same terms: *Faith assures us of things we expect and convinces us of the existence of things we cannot see. God accepted our ancestors because of their faith.* Not the faith that is empty of love, not repeated actions but empty of content - rather a faith that is filled with love for God and for our neighbour.

I have often shared the words of the following affirmation of faith from the United Church of Canada, which I find both challenging and stimulating, and I would like to conclude today with these words:

We are not alone; we live in God's world.

We believe in God: who has created and is creating,
who has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh,
to reconcile and make new,
who works in us and others by the Spirit.

We trust in God.
We are called to be the Church:
to celebrate God's presence,
to live with respect in Creation,
to love and serve others,
to seek justice and resist evil,
to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,
our judge and our hope.

In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us.
We are not alone. Thanks be to God. Amen.