

Immanuel, 5th February 2023
Isaiah 58; 1-12 Matthew 5; 12-20

God's way – our ways?

So often the Bible presents us with really deep questions, and today's readings certainly do this - the BIG question being – how are we to follow God's ways? because over the years there seems to be quite different forms of responding to this. And let us be equally honest, that over the years the particulars of God's way have adapted to the way life is lived.

The world as it was 700 years before Christ, the time of Isaiah was not the same world as when Jesus walked the ways of Palestine, and those times are quite different from our times, so how do we respond to the question on how we follow God's ways today?

These two readings are quite challenging, as they put to us the practical consequences of being community. What I mean by this, is we have never been more people on earth, something in the order of 8 billion people, linked together in many different ways. And often these ways clash with each other; we can blame it on how we understand faith, or belonging to different ways of living faith, but we must also recognise that there are different ways of being "Christian" and sometimes these ways don't get on too well. I have often found that I have more in common with people who have no faith, or have a different expression of faith, than I have with some people who proclaim a certain understanding of the Christian faith.

To the question, what does God expect from us? There can be multiple answers. But let us focus on these two readings today to try and explore the way forward. The last UK census tells us that Christianity is now less than 49%, according to how people themselves define themselves. So faith as such may not have the impact it used to have; but does it mean that the other 51% of people are not capable of doing good? Clearly we have never held the monopoly of goodness, have we? We are at a time where we have to re-think what it means to be a follower of Jesus, and its impact on the world.

So we are told that we are expected to be "light of the world", or "salt of the earth", we are told that we must be more righteous than the Pharisees and scribes, who possessed the right knowledge but not the right practice, so clearly "knowing about the will of God" is not enough, is it? It is not what Jesus "knows" that marks him out, it is what he does, who he connects with, the newness of his ways. Think of those whom Jesus has difficulties with, and how this challenges us today.

And so we turn to Isaiah – here again we recognise the distance between seeking God's ways and doing God's ways. The readings begins with the acceptable ways of the time -fasting, being humble...but they have become external acts with no impact, no connection with "living faithfully". Today we would say that worship is our way of expressing our faith as community, but how does it bring us closer to God's will? How are we changed for the everyday? How does worship make us different/new?

In Isaiah we encounter a people who live deeply religious lives, but they claim that God doesn't see this, or hear this. So, what is going on? What is missing is shown in verses 6ff, when through the prophet God asks – is not this the fast I choose...? And then says, if you 'remove the yoke from among you...offer food to the hungry, attend to the afflicted...THEN, your light shall shine in the darkness' (taking us back to what Jesus said in Matthew). Here is how God guides and satisfies, and

the people of God shall rise up and be called repairers and restorers. This is a wonderful promise, which affirms the openness of God's people to the fullness of life in the world. This is when our ways are connected to God's ways. And clearly our country needs this, our world need this. And each of us are challenged to carry this out – to practise God's will, in such a way that it becomes our way.

It was very upsetting, when at World Concerns meeting on Wednesday, we heard that Tradecraft plc is going into administration. The Charity arm of Tradecraft: Transform Trade, will keep going. We spent some time reflection of all the good Tradecraft had done in transforming commerce, and peoples understanding of trade justice, and we were encouraged that the regional work of Tradecraft will continue. This is clearly one of the ways we walk together with all people who feel compelled by God's ways. Another way, is how we relate to the community in which we live, and share life with. William Temple once said that 'the church is the only organization that exists solely for the benefit of non-members'.

There is lots to discover, and lots to do on the way ahead. May the Spirit of Life guide us on the way.

God of the people of the past, the people of the present and the people to come.

Giver of love's law, in whom there is no blandness, no dullness of oppression;

Liberate us from all that numbs compassion

To find in your commands light undimmed

And flavour unrestrained; through

Jesus Christ, fulfiller of the law. Amen

(Prayers for an inclusive church)