

Isaiah is my favourite prophet - hands down. From his call to the often used promises that complement the Christmas story, I'm a big fan. Never mind that the book that we call Isaiah is widely acknowledged by scholars as coming from three separate time periods, and can't be easily credited to a single prophet. The sense of God that comes from the pages of Isaiah - of God's sovereignty; God's justice and mercy; God's determination to offer help and peace and rest - even if only to a small remnant of the faithful - is powerful indeed.

And the prophet's arguments are so real. On God's behalf, the prophet calls the people out for the shallow and self-serving way they approach their religious observance. And in that criticism we might hear something we recognize...

How often have you heard people who no longer attend church- or who claim to have 'no faith in God' use what I'll call 'the hypocrisy defense'? You know what I mean: "The church is full of hypocrites - saying one thing on Sunday and doing their own thing the rest of the week..."

It's not an uncommon accusation, and I'm forced to admit that there are times when I have acted in ways that might confirm it. The complicated sociological reason behind this is that people imagine that the Christian religion in particular is aiming people toward some sort of perfection, so when people encounter doubt or duplicity or rage or some other deadly (or inconvenient) sin amongst the faithful, they can offer their theory and stay away from another week of worship.

Isaiah calls out the sham that religious observance had become. Not that the rituals are unimportant - but that their significance is no longer recognized by those who offer them. What is described in Isaiah 58 is social religion - the religion of good appearances. The people said the right words and performed the proper ceremonies - flawlessly - so the world would know that they were church people. And the prophet mourns this practice: "Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day..." squabbles and quarrels - oppression and injustice -there is no room for this kind of foolishness in the lives of those who are genuinely shaping their lives after God. The actions of fast days have been disconnected from the purpose of fast days - and the people complain that "we cannot see God...!"

No wonder, says God through the prophet.

Our love of ritual - our fascination with the mechanics of religious observance is an age old problem. It shows up as ritualism or legalism - folks who are obsessed with “getting back to basics’ where the faith is concerned. Fundamentalists of every religion are (at their best) caught up in that pursuit of religious purity - the thing that they believe will bring God more clearly into view (and mark them as amongst the dearly beloved). And those folks really perk up when Jesus talks about how he has come to fulfil the law in Matthew chapter 5.

Observance of the law lies at the heart of religious purity and perfection in the minds of some, and here comes Jesus declaring that not one letter of the law will change while the sun shines and the earth turns. The law too has an eternal quality (according to Jesus) and it is worthwhile to consider what that means.

We don’t need to quibble about the number (or the historical context) of the system of Jewish religious law that is contained in Scripture - Jesus will say elsewhere that they are all summed up in two statements: Love God and love one another. What is important is that the law was given to guide human relationships following a pattern that reflected something ideal - something wonderful - something that mirrors the beauty and love and peace of the ‘kingdom of God.’

Jesus knows his Scripture. Jesus understands the problems inherent with aiming for perfection in observance of the law. But like Isaiah, Jesus knows that it is in the effort to make better relationship - to seek to honour the law by loving God and one another, and in that love to ‘share your bread with the hungry, and to bring the homeless poor into your house...’ - in even an imperfect observance that seeks the welfare of neighbour or stranger, we will see God.

Following that pattern - and aiming to be both salt and light - we are forced beyond the fine points of imagined perfection, and dragged fully into the world as it is. So our religious observance is social and political and economic and in every way practical. There is no point in taking attendance, or observing dress codes, or lighting candles or following any other ritual observance if we do not (first) reach out in love to one another – across social, political, economic and cultural boundaries.