

Sunday 2nd March – Rev. Ruth Maxey

Isaiah 58:3-8

‘Why do we fast, but you do not see?

Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?’

Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day,
and oppress all your workers.

Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.

Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.

Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?

Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?

Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the Lord?

Is not this 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?
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear-guard.

Matthew 6:1-18

Concerning Almsgiving

‘Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

‘So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Concerning Prayer

‘And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

‘When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

‘Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts,

as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And do not bring us to the time of trial,

but rescue us from the evil one.

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Concerning Fasting

‘And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

When I was a **Chaplain at Keele** there was a Sunday evening **student led service**. The students who organised it always came up with **really interesting themes** for the term. One year it was on animals in the bible – very random when your theme is ‘camels’ or ‘fish’ – but quite fun thinking of interesting readings!

But the **best series they had** (I think!) was entitled **’10 things I hate about Christians’** – (those you who haven’t got the reference, there was a film entitled **’10 things I hate about you!’**) It was **remarkably easy to think of things** – and the top of the list was **’hypocrisy!’**. What so often people see when **they look at Christians is a group of people who say one thing and do the opposite?**

The **reading from Isaiah** is partly about hypocrisy, **about a people who are happy to go off and praise God while people are suffering**. This passage from Isaiah is **not easy listening**. His words cut through all the hypocrisy and they are **words that are as relevant today as they ever have been**.

But **isn’t Isaiah being a bit hard on the Israelites?** Isn’t **God being a bit hard on them?** They probably **thought they were doing the right thing**. Isn’t that **what God wanted them to do?** To spend time **praying, going to the temple, fasting, worshiping**. And here they were getting it in the neck for being all

religious, which is after all what you would expect God to want from people.

I mean, **God is the most religious person around?** To come to say our prayers - and then hey presto God will be pleased with us. We’ll have **got lots of brownie points** and feel rather chuffed that **we’ve done the right thing**. Well unfortunately I think Isaiah’s words are as much for us today as they were for the Israelites 1000’s of years ago. We’d **still rather follow religious ritual and practice than have our hearts changed** and work for justice and righteousness, we still **find it easier to be religious than follow Jesus way of love and self-giving**.

What Isaiah **so powerfully expresses** is the connection between **our worship and our lives**. We had a **wonderful service today**, fantastic music, powerful preaching, beautiful prayers – but God **takes no pleasure in that worship** if it does not lead to **working and acting for justice** and righteousness in our world. **We all love a good bit of worship**, it is great to feel uplifted, I love music that I can really belt out – but our **worship should not be an escape** from the world, an escape from all the **burning issues of social justice**; death penalty, refugees, racism, human rights and so on.

Why was God so angry with the Israelites? They were praying, they were keeping the festivals, what had they done wrong? They **had shut their eyes to the poverty and injustice** that surrounded them. **Their faith had no action, it was hollow in the centre**. Their prayers were no more than words. Around them people suffered and they did nothing.

Is that true of us too? Of course in some ways it is bound to be. We live in a **time of global communication**, we see not only the homeless on our own streets but the **killing of innocents in Syria**, children dying of malnutrition on the **TV screen in front of us**, the poverty of millions. And yet sometimes **we do not see because we**

cannot bear to see and it's easier to be ostrich like with our head deep in the sand. It is **easier to come and worship and forget it all** than face the challenge of living out our faith in the world.

These **are hard readings today**, readings where we **can feel such failures**. This one from Isaiah I found **so hard when I first visited India in my teens** – I looked **poverty in the face** and the injustice in our world became so clear. **Worship seemed hollow** and God's challenge to our complacency real...and it is **a real challenge**.

And then we have this **passage from Matthew's gospel** where **Jesus lays into people who put on a lot of show** around their faith – where **prayer and fasting and religious practice** are also about hypocrisy, about the **way we look to the crowd rather than look to God**.

When we **start to think about hypocrisy**, about what these readings are all about we **start to get really twitchy** and the danger is that **rather than being less focused** on what others think of us and our faithfulness, our worship, **we become more focused, more aware**

It is that **sense of constant assessment**, the **hypocrisy meter** always **ready to go 'ding'** when you do or say something that somehow **isn't deemed to chime** with what you purport to believe. I **am a vegetarian** and I know that feeling – you've just popped a **gummy bear in your mouth** and some **smug meat eater** points out that you can't be a **proper vegetarian**.

The danger there is **that rather than a real connection growing between how we live our lives**, how we are transformed by Jesus and the words that we say, in worship, to each other, we actually end up **putting on a 'Christian Mask'**.

To be honest, the more involved in **Christian leadership**, the more **involved generally that we are in Church**, in Christian groups the

more likely we are to build up that mask – because it is **easy to feel more scrutinised** when you have, sort of, put yourself out there. And to somehow think you **need to be someone**, a certain type of person.

But those masks, in the long run, are no good. They slip, people aren't fooled and **the sense of hypocrisy grows** because the mask **widens the gap between what is in here and what we say and do**. We start to pretend to be what we are not, we feel a fraud and if we're not careful **we even start to put the mask on when we talk to God** (as if God was fooled). God doesn't want fakes – **God wants real followers, real people, with all our quirks and issues**

I had quite a rough ride on my journey to ministry because of all this stuff. **I dropped out of training** because I couldn't do the mask bit, I felt I had to be a **certain sort of person to be a minister** with a certain sort of lifestyle and somehow I just didn't fit – but I **came back** because I, in the end felt God was **calling me as I was, yes there were faults and failings**, there still are, but he was calling me to ministry as me – **not some pious mask** – but Ruth.

At the heart of this passage from Matthew is the **call to come before God simply as we are**, not as the people we think we should be but the people we are – with our faults and quirks and irritations.

It is **you that God is calling, not some religious cardboard cut-out**. There is a line in the middle of this passage that says:

'your Father knows what you need before you ask him'.

It reminds **us that God knows us, deeply, at our heart**.

I want to finish by reading a **wonderful very well-known psalm** – it speaks of the fact that **we are created and known by God, it reflects on God's intimate knowledge of us**, a knowledge that **begins before we were born**, as we were 'knit together in our

mother's womb'. **God made us.** We are **not the random result of natural selection** we are wanted and **desired and made by God.**

Oliver, who we baptised today, was made by God, Charlie, who we welcomed today, was made by God. **Each and every one of us is desired and made by God.** That means we are special, unique. Whether our birth was an accident, whether our parents wanted us or not, whether we have a disability or not, we are unique and special **and created and known by God.** So no masks, no hypocrisy because God sees through it all to our heart and loves us.

Psalm 139