

Sunday 9th February 2020

The Third Sunday before Lent

Septuagesima Proper 1

Green



Collect.

O God, you know us to be set in the midst of so many and great dangers, that by reason of the frailty of our nature we cannot always stand upright: Grant to us such strength and protection as may support us in all dangers and carry us through all temptations; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Isaiah 58:1-9 English Standard Version (ESV)

True and False Fasting

58 ¹”Cry aloud; do not hold back; lift up your voice like a trumpet; declare to my people their transgression, to the house of Jacob their sins. ²Yet they seek me daily and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the judgment of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments; they delight to draw near to God. ³’Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?’ Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure,^[a] and oppress all your workers. ⁴Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high. ⁵Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the LORD? ⁶”Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed^[b] go free, and to break every yoke? ⁷Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? ⁸Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. ⁹Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, ‘Here I am.’ If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness.

Footnotes: a. or *pursue your own business*. b. or *bruised*.

COMMENT: Ancient tribal tradition which ultimately found expression in the Decalogue verbalized a strong sense of social justice. The call for social justice sounds through this passage in sharp contrast to vain rituals like fasting. The great historical events of Israel's faith history - the exodus, the wilderness sojourn, the covenant - also found expression in liturgy. Through those liturgies, the events became realities of faith and experience. Fasting was a liturgical response to a moral and spiritual crisis (e.g. Judges 20:26ff; 1 Samuel 7:6; 1 Kings 21:12; Psalm 35:13). When Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians and the temple was destroyed in 586 BC, an extended re-examination of the national history occurred. After the return from exile and the reconstruction of the temple fasting became an expression of contrition and penitence. (Zechariah 7:1-7; 8:18-19). This passage from Isaiah 58 voices a prophetic corrective to rituals which had become hypocritical. It asks why God ignores the sacred ritual and gives a prophetic response in the name of the God who prefers simple justice to empty stomachs and emptier souls. The oracle would appear to come from that intermediary period between Second Isaiah and Zechariah, and was probably composed by a disciple of the former. Specific instances of injustice receive the condemnation they deserve (verses 3-4). The passage also gives clear descriptions of how to create a different social environment where justice rules (verses 6-7). A promise of communion with God is the reward to be derived from these actions (verses 8-9a). In prophetic passages like this the church today still finds its mandate to call on its own resources and on political leaders for a realistic concern for the poor, the oppressed and the homeless. Yet these poetic lines were composed more than 2500 years ago by an unknown prophet who stands in the tradition of Israel's great voices for justice - Amos, Micah and Isaiah. The world awaits a fellowship of faithful people willing to risk implementing such a plan in this age.

Matthew 5:13-20 English Standard Version (ESV)

Salt and Light

5¹³ “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet. ¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that^[a] they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Christ Came to Fulfill the Law

¹⁷ “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does

them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Footnotes: a. or house. ¹⁶Let your light so shine before others that

Comment: Three brief excerpts from Jesus' teaching – probably given at different times - have become memorable criteria for Christian living: salt that savours, light that can be seen clearly, and the eternal validity of God's commandments. This is still the quality of life for every Christian disciple. For the faithful Jew, Torah was - and is - more than law; it is a way of life in the real world in communion with and obedience to God. Like the prophets before him, Jesus did not seek to destroy Torah. He only sought to enrich and fulfil it in every human life. Matthew's Gospel presented Jesus as the new Moses who would lead Israel out of the rigidity and bondage which had encumbered Torah for centuries. Torah, God's unique gift to Israel, was for the ordinary person, not the exclusive priest, learned scholar or haughty scribe of minute legalisms. Righteousness was indeed the fulfilment of the law, but exclusive self-righteousness was not only unjust but contrary to the inclusive love for every person who sought to be in fellowship with the One who sought to gift the whole world through Israel. It has been said that Jesus wished to be nothing more than a faithful Jew. It was God's will that the man from Nazareth become the saviour of the world by living Torah in all its beauty and fullness.

Psalm 112 *Beatus vir* Grail Psalter

℟ The good man is a light in the darkness for the upright.

¹ Alleluia! Happy the man who fears the Lord,
who takes delight in all his commands.

² His sons will be powerful on earth;
the children of the upright are blessed. **℟**

³ Riches and wealth are in his house;
his justice stands firm for ever.

⁴ He is a light in the darkness for the upright:
he is generous, merciful and just. **℟**

⁵ The good man takes pity and lends,
he conducts his affairs with honour.

⁶ The just man will never waver:
he will be remembered for ever. **℟**

⁷ He has no fear of evil news;
with a firm heart he trusts in the Lord.

⁸ With a steadfast heart he will not fear;
he will see the downfall of his foes.

℟ **The good man is a light in the darkness for the upright.**

⁹ Open-handed, he gives to the poor;
his justice stands firm for ever.
His head will be raised in glory. **℟**

¹⁰ The wicked man sees and is angry,
grinds his teeth and fades away;
the desire of the wicked leads to doom. **℟**

**Glory be to the Father and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit,
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.**

COMMENT: This didactic psalm resonates with both the tradition which emerge in exile with emphasis on the just rewards of the righteous and the prophetic tradition of social justice. It comes from the so-called Hebrew Wisdom literature generally thought to have been created during the Persian period of Jewish history 539 – 333 BC using older sources.

Post Communion.

God of tender care, in this Eucharist we celebrate your love for us and for all people. May we show your love in our lives and know its fulfilment in your presence. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

The Blessing.

May God, who in Christ gives us a spring of water welling up to eternal life, perfect in you the image of his glory; and the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be among *you*, and remain with *you* always. **Amen.**