

Year A, 5 Epiphany
Isaiah 58:1-9a
Psalm 112:1-9
1 Corinthians 2:1-12
Matthew 5:13-20

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This morning the lessons might seem particularly challenging, because God is talking about who we are, and what we should be doing as a result. Sometimes that can be hard to hear. We know that God loves us, but it can be hard to hear the expectations of how we are to live as God's people.

But Isaiah starts off with a bang—or a trumpet blast:

Shout out, do not hold back!

Lift up your voice like a trumpet!
Announce to my people their **rebellion**,
to the house of Jacob their **sins**.
Yet day after day they seek me
and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness
and did not **forsake** the ordinance of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgments,
they delight to draw near to God

God is the speaker here, saying that the people of Israel are not getting the message about who they are, and how they should live. The Torah, God's law, is very specific about what God expects from the people, but they're not living the Torah, as we will see. Nonetheless, the people are saying that they want to be close to God—they say they're trying, but their actions don't seem to live out their words. And God is not pleased. What is happening here?

If we think about the context of this passage of Isaiah, things might be a little clearer. Isaiah is preaching here to the Jews who have been returning from exile. They've been allowed back into their homeland after about 60 years of being made to live in Babylonia, but they are still an oppressed people: their king is gone, they're being ruled by Persia, and their *temple has been destroyed*. So now God's people are trying to figure out how to worship God, and how to sustain their identity as Jews in this difficult new situation. They're really struggling to define

who they are, now that they *still* don't govern themselves in their own country. And they're trying to figure out how to worship God in a place that had always been about temple worship—but remember, they don't have a temple anymore. So we can see that there could be good reason for all kinds of confusion here, when the people ask God,

“Why do we fast, but you do not see?
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”

They're asking a question that we might all ask from time to time, “God, why aren't you answering my prayer?”

And God answers: “Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day.”

The people are serving their own interests. They're not serving God, they're serving themselves. They're fasting, they're wearing sackcloth and sitting in ashes, maybe to feel good about their own righteousness, or to have their neighbors notice—but it's not for God. And it's not doing them any good. It's not changing their behavior for the better—which is supposed to be part of the point of ritual.

On the contrary, God says they're oppressing their workers, and fighting amongst themselves. Not at all what God had in mind. Instead, God says this is what's wanted:

to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
...to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,

The Jews are an oppressed people in their own land, but God is still calling them to be who they've always been called to be: a light unto the nations. They are to help the oppressed, to feed the hungry, and to house the homeless. That is the sacrifice that God wants. Note that God doesn't say that people shouldn't fast, or engage in other acts of worship, but that this should result in changing their hearts, and their behavior—it should result in making them want to help others.

Not surprisingly, Jesus calls for something very similar in the Gospel lesson for today. Last Sunday's gospel was the first part of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus was describing who was blessed. In this second part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus uses two metaphors to define his community: salt, and light.

He says, "you are the salt of the earth," —actually in the Greek, it's "y'all"—that plural "you" and the emphasis is very much on the "y'all" part of this sentence. So **y'all are** the salt of the earth. Not y'all **can be** the salt of the earth, if you do x, y and z, or y'all **SHOULD BE** the salt of the earth, but "y'all **ARE** the salt of the earth." He is very encouraging, and affirming here. But why salt? Well, throughout history, salt has been incredibly important; without its use as a preservative, a great deal of food would have spoiled. It was also valued as a seasoning, of course, because it enhances the flavor of things. But in Jewish culture, salt was also a *symbol of the covenant between God and God's people*, and certain sacrifices in the temple required salt on them. Also, to show that a **covenant was eternal**, the Jews sealed it with salt. So in comparing them to a valuable thing like salt, Jesus shows a very high opinion of his disciples. And if Jesus' followers already **are** the salt of the earth, then certain things are true: they can preserve things that should be preserved. They should be following the law, preserving their culture, keeping what makes them unique. If they're like salt, then they can enhance the goodness of things, bring out the goodness of things. They are about eliciting the good in the world. And they are also sealing God's eternal covenant with the earth. God doesn't forget God's people.

The second metaphor is light. Jesus says, "Y'all **ARE** the light of the world." For the disciples this probably reminded them of Isaiah's statement that God's people were to be a "light to all nations," helping those in need, and bringing about a reign of peace on earth. I think that's mostly what Jesus is about here, referring to Jerusalem, the city built on a hill that can't be hidden, and exhorting his followers to "let y'all's light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." The disciples are to do good works, not because they earn God's favor in some way by doing them, but because those works glorify God. This leads directly into the discussion of the law. Jesus makes it clear that he is not about abolishing the law. Instead, he is fulfilling it. He is the promised Messiah, and his followers live out both the letter, and the spirit of the law. Not the empty ritual for its own sake, like the scribes and Pharisees, but Jesus' followers have **transformed hearts** as a result of the law, and that makes them walk the talk.

And now the question might be "so what?" How does this apply to us?

A lot of you know that I worked full-time as a chaplain at Winchester Medical Center. In working there I meet people from all walks of life, sometimes very, very poor people. One day I was talking with a man recovering from surgery. I had prayed with him before his surgery, and had come to check up on him a couple of days later, and he was recovering well. As we talked for a while, I discovered that he was homeless, and that he would probably go to a shelter when he was discharged. He was amazed that, while at the hospital, the fact that he was homeless had not seemed to matter, at all. “They call me “Mister” here, and I get to pick what I have to eat, and they ask me if I have everything I need. Nobody outside of here ever asks me that.” He became a bit tearful as he thought about this. “Nobody outside of this place asks me that. Here they treat me like a **king**.” As I think about that man, and how he was treated in the hospital, I would say that we should all be asking him if he has everything he needs. As God’s people today, the scriptures call to us in the same way they called to Isaiah’s and Jesus’ people.

We all are called
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
...to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,

I think as a parish community, Christ Church is doing this in many ways. But how this plays out in our individual lives is up to us as individuals, isn’t it? What does it mean to YOU to loose the bonds of injustice? When we see injustice, it’s usually easier to look the other way. Fighting injustice is very uncomfortable. It can also be dangerous. But we are called to do it.

Sharing our bread with the hungry, bringing the homeless poor into our house, covering the naked—what does that look like for YOU? There are lots of charities to partner with here, and I imagine that you know someone personally who would benefit from your help. Again, it might not be comfortable—But we’re called to do it. As Jesus asks his disciples to enhance the good in the world, and do good works, so he asks us to do it, as well.

And y’all ARE salt. Y’all ARE light. Be who you really are. Amen.