

The 4th Sunday before Advent, 30 October 2022

Isaiah 1.1,10-18; Psalm 32.1-8; 2 Thessalonians 1.1-12; Luke 19.1-10

This morning we will begin by focusing our thoughts on the reading from the first chapter of the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. The assumed context for the prophet's utterances is the occupation of much of the kingdom of Judah by the Assyrians under their king Sennacherib with the exception of Jerusalem. Isaiah as the Lord's mouthpiece is telling the people of Jerusalem to 'hear the word' of the Lord and 'to listen to the teaching' of God, the God of Israel, if they want to be spared the same fate as the rest of Judah: occupation by a foreign power and deportation. God has a word for his people, as well as something he wants to teach them. The word spoken and the teaching given have relevance for today.

Isaiah on behalf of God identifies two deficits amongst the inhabitants of Jerusalem, which are related. These are one worship that has become ritualistic and hollow and evidenced two by the disregard the worshippers, those who frequent the Temple with their sacrifices with their bloody hands have for seeking justice, rescuing the oppressed, defending the orphan and pleading for the widow. The longer indictment in today's reading is about the hollowness of the worship that is being offered as it does not lead to doing what is right in the eyes of the Lord. To do good is to emulate what God wants. For Jesus there is only one who is good and that is as he says, His Father in heaven.

The prophet speaks harsh words. He does not mince them when he says, the Lord can't endure your solemn assemblies full of iniquity meaning wickedness and sin. God is fed up. God has had enough. The call to be an instrument of God's will in the world is here preceded by a call to repentance in no uncertain terms, "Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove your evil deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil; ...".

One can in our secular society be tempted to think that worship doesn't matter as even some few Christians are given to say. One can also say that ordered worship like we know it for the most part at Christ Church is utterly null and void, as Christians from other denominations are prone to say with a blindness to their own rituals and ordering of worship. Given the time and the context of the words the Prophet utters on behalf of God the conclusions outlined above made by subsequent generations are mistaken. The Prophet's utterances suggest that doing good and worship actually belong together and that likewise repentance and doing good belong together. They are different sides of the same coin. Worship, true

worship, leads to action. First the act of repentance and the act of doing good according to God's direction. It leads to seeking justice, rescuing the oppressed, defending the orphan and pleading for the widow. Right actions are derived from being in a living relationship with God. This is what is not happening here. Worship leads to seeing where one has fallen short. It calls us back to the essential message that God is seeking to communicate and teach. The assurance of sins forgiven is given to set us free to be for God in the world, to be instruments of mercy, peace, and justice to name a few.

Last week you heard me briefly take the side of the Pharisee in the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. The Pharisee to my mind was someone who was seeking to order his life before God and for God with some obvious shortcomings as the parable makes abundantly clear. The one who goes away justified is the Tax Collector, who coming before God acknowledges that he is a sinner in need of God's mercy, as he simply says, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

Today I want to take the side of ordered worship for a few moments because a text like today's, which is perfectly understandable and correct and can at times lead to a false conclusion, as it has done down the centuries namely the assertion that ordered worship is worthless. It can be worthless, but it can also be rich and enriching and life giving and if it isn't rich enriching it is woefully wanting as today's reading makes abundantly clear.

Worship can become simply ritualistic, if we are not on our guard, if we become lazy in our preparations and our devotions. Many of us will know people who get caught up in the vestments and the various liturgies. Are you using this rite or that? Order one or two? Which Eucharistic prayer? Is it Tridentine mass? Is it a post-Vatican II liturgy? Do you prefer Latin to English? Do you prefer Elizabethan English to Modern English? Should the service be eastward or westward facing... The list is endless. These are often only ever secondary matters, but they are of importance to us who worship week by week and often more. Should the music be contemporary speaking to this our generation? Should it be unfathomable taking us out of ourselves and allowing some distance to our contemporary world, so that we might be able to better reflect on what is happening and be reminded of the divine economy?

Many of the answers to the questions I have raised are not either or they can be both and. But actions and symbols have meaning. Nothing is just done for the sake of doing it. We sit to listen. We stand to praise God as in our hymns and the Gloria. We kneel to pray, to receive a blessing, and to receive Holy Communion. We listen

so that we may understand. We stand that we may praise God opening ourselves to him. We kneel as we come before God's majesty reminding ourselves of God's greatness and otherness thereby gaining hopefully a right perspective and a reordering of our relationship with the Living God expressed through the use of our bodies. In this sense worship is to be holistic. It can and does include from time to time the use of incense reminding us of prayers rising to God, enveloping the liturgy in a cloud of smoke that reminds of God's transcendence, calling us to become a sweet and pleasing odour to the Lord through our attitudes, our values, our actions, our responses, and our repentance. Worship is not an end in itself.

At the church council planning day at the beginning of October the suggestion was made to have another go at what is termed 'teaching Eucharists', as we did back in Judy's time. Why do we do this and that? Today I have explained a little about the use of our bodies in worship: standing, kneeling, and sitting. There is also the action of crossing yourself and bending the knee as commended by the Psalmist and others. So look out for notices in the wrap and weekly email and listen for announcements at the end of services with details of the dates of the 'teaching Eucharists'.

We put a high value on worship and prayer at Christ Church, as evidenced by three Sunday services and opportunities to come together during the week in person and on Zoom. I find that worship and prayer steady me throughout the week. They keep me focused. They call me back to God. Likewise they call me back into the world to live faithfully continuing to worship God through acts of service. The acts of seeking justice, rescuing the oppressed, defending the orphan and pleading for the widow.

These four actions of seeking, rescuing, defending and pleading accompanied by repentance can be likened to a manifesto. A Christian is always someone who is not only being, but is also doing. A Christian is someone who is always seeking God's will for their lives and for the world. A Christian is always someone who in the name of God is seeking to rescue themselves, neighbours and society from wrong turns. A Christian is always someone who is called to defend the weak and the strangers in our midst. The Christian is always someone who stands by those who cannot fend for themselves exemplified in the phrase the widow and the orphan. All of this foundational to the I am saying that Jesus speaks in St John's Gospel, "I am the way, the truth and the life".

We come to worship and thinking of today's gospel we come to see Jesus as Zacchaeus did. What did Zacchaeus see when he climbed the tree? He saw people

crowding Jesus in as the whole village can out to meet him. Zacchaeus was short in stature we are told. Worship in the ordered form we have received it in our Tradition within the Church gives us the ability in and through all the different components to see Jesus. I am thinking here of the Christian year and especially of the Feast of All Saints, which we will be keeping at Christ Church on Tuesday, as it is a holy day and holiday in Austria. The Feast of All Saints' is the great harvest festival of the Church and of which John the Seer in the Book of Revelation provides a vivid picture. His vision is the tree we climb to see the bigger picture. Without a vision grounded in God and what God is doing we perish, as we read in Proverbs (29.18)

Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. He went and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne. When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.

They sing a new song:

**'You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God
saints from every tribe and language and people and nation;
you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God,
and they will reign on earth.'**

Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice,

**'Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honour and glory and blessing!'**

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing,

**'To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honour and glory and might
for ever and ever!'**

And the four living creatures said, 'Amen!'

And the elders fell down and worshipped. Amen and Amen.

