

Isaiah 1:10-20 Purify your hearts

How many of us keep an appointment calendar? it's a very necessary part of life these days' isn't it? It doesn't seem to matter what stage of life we are in, whether we're working or retired, life is just plain busy! If we need to make a doctor's or dentist's appointment - we check the diary. If we need to see a specialist, that takes pride of place in the diary, and everything else has to fit in around it. If the kids want to come and stay, or they want us to go and stay with them - we check the diary. If we want to travel - we check the diary.

Yes indeed - life can be very busy. If we're not careful, it can get to the stage where even God himself needs an appointment....

The children of Israel had become very busy in their lives also - busy with a myriad of rituals, rules and religious observances. They had mingled their observances of the Jewish law with the requirements of the pagan rituals that were part of the culture around them. It was all so consuming that they'd lost what was at the heart of their religion - their worship of the one true God and their relationship with him. They'd reached a point where all their religion consisted of was external observances - which actually suited them fine. It was a lot less demanding than living the way God had called them to live.

God was not pleased. Once again they were headed for judgement - but God wanted them to turn around so that judgement wasn't necessary. He was willing to offer them cleansing and forgiveness. Listen to the heart of God in v. 18: **“Come now, let us argue it out, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.”**

That's what God truly wanted - but this offer came with three requirements.

First of all the people had to stop and listen!

“Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!”

When I started teaching, one of the things I learned early in the piece was that if I wanted the class to hear what I was saying, they had to stop what they were doing and pay attention. I lost count of the number of times I said, “Stop what you're doing, and face the front” or “put your pens down and look at me.” If they continued to chat to the person next to them, or if they

continued to work in their books, what I said would go straight over their heads. it wouldn't register.

God was saying to the children of Israel - "Stop and listen! I have something to say to you."

God says that to us as well. "Stop and listen. Take time out from your busy schedules to pay attention to me; put down the busyness of your life for a time, so that we can communicate." The command Isaiah gives to the Israelites, he also gives to the Church - "Hear the word of the Lord.....Listen to the teaching of our God!"

But to do that, we need to stop and listen. (rhetorical question) What does that mean for you and me right now - today? Stop and listen. What might have to change in our lives to allow that to happen?

Secondly the Israelites had to stop what they were doing wrong.

They had stepped away from the heart of their faith. Jesus summarised the commandments as two - love God with everything you've got, and love your neighbour as much as you love yourself. But the Israelites were doing so much that defied those commandments:

They had ceased to love God with their whole heart every time they worshipped an idol, every time they celebrated a pagan festival, every time they sullied their worship with half hearted offerings.

They ceased to love their neighbour every time they turned their back on the injustices that were done to widows and orphans. Back then widows & orphans had no rights and no social standing. They were so vulnerable that even the little they had could easily be stripped from them - and it happened often.

They ceased to love their neighbour every time they turned their back on someone who was homeless or sick or hungry or an alien in their land.

There is a strong message here for today's church here as well. We would do well to ask if there's anything that we as a church or we as individuals need to stop doing. Or if there's anything we need to purify because it has become half hearted or sullied?

Idols do not have to be graven images. Anything that becomes a substitute for God which commands our full attention and gets first priority in our lives is an idol.

Even Christians can be wooed by the lure of materialism and self focus. An interesting test of where our primary focus in life lies is to intentionally observe where our thoughts go when they are not filled by the necessary things of life. Do they ever drift towards God and his kingdom, or is our more leisurely thinking consumed by our wants and desires?

The Holy Spirit within will convict us of any wrong attitude or focus if we are brave enough to invite him to do so.

It's easy to read the words of Isaiah and keep them neatly tied to the nation of Israel in the Old Testament. But we need to realise that God may also discipline his church if it strays too far. Parents who love their children will discipline them if they rebel. They do it to protect their children and to help them grow. Wise and appropriate discipline is actually an act of love. God loves his church, and we are not immune from his discipline.

I think that is something bear in mind right now. At present, institutions across this nation are under the scrutiny of the Royal Commission into sexual abuse. The Church has not escaped this scrutiny. The Commission is revealing the darkest of underbellies in the Christian Church. It is shocking, horrifying and costly in so many ways. Our sin is being exposed, and judgement is being executed. We are being purified. It is an intensely painful process, as purification so often is. But it is a necessary process. It is telling, isn't it, that God has used the secular nation to purify the church. It has the ring of the Old Testament about it.

But as painful as the revelations are, this is something the Church must address, and it is long overdue. But we will surface from this, and go on to honour and serve our Lord, though I hope somewhat more alert to our own frailty.

While I'm talking about this, can I invite you to take the time to read a pastoral letter sent to all the churches in the diocese by Bishop Stuart. I've emailed it to those who have their email address with us, and there is a hard copy on the notice board. I can make more hard copies available if people would like them.

In the face of the pain and disillusionment that the Royal Commission revelations have brought, Bishop Stuart helps bring perspective and encouragement to us. It is very much worth reading.

Getting back to the passage....

Thirdly, the Israelites were told to go & do what is right

“Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” says Isaiah. If he were living in today’s culture, he would no doubt add, “meet the needs of the refugee”

This was what God wanted from the Israelites – not empty burnt-offerings, not incense, not festivals or many prayers. He wanted their whole hearts. And he wanted their worship to reflect this in how they lived their everyday lives.

Another message for today’s church might concern our own worship. How is the calibre of our worship? Does it carry over from Sunday into our day to day lives?

In today’s psalm, we read: ‘The person who honours me brings a sacrifice of thanksgiving: And to him who keeps to my way I shall show the salvation of God.’ Worship that is pleasing to God is marked by an attitude of thanksgiving - which shows itself in contentment with what we have and generosity towards others; it shows itself in a life lived in according to God’s commands.

All our observances are welcome to God, if they are in the context of a relationship that honours him above all else, and a life that is lived in love towards others. Without that context, our observances and rituals are empty and meaningless to God.

For our worship to be acceptable to God, the rubber needs to hit the road by the way we live our lives.

So to recap, the three requirements God places before the Israelites - and us - are these:

1. Stop and listen
2. Stop doing what is wrong
3. Go and do what is right

In a nutshell, these three requirements are a description of simple repentance. When we repent, God is able to shower his mercy upon us.

Passages like these about sin and judgement, can leave us feeling a little overwhelmed - perhaps even discouraged. But the thing we need to remember is that God longs to bless, not judge. He invites us to come to him as we are. And if we will simply listen to his prompting, repent and walk in his way, then he will cleanse us and forgive us and restore us - every single time.

Let me close with v 18 from the CEV translation:

I, the LORD, invite you to come and talk it over. Your sins are scarlet red, but they will be whiter than snow or wool.

Let us pray