

St Peters, Ealing
Sunday 5th February 2017
4 before Lent

Honesty is the best policy

The Torah was given to the people of God to draw them closer to God. To help them live righteous and God centred lives. Born in the furnace of a new nation the law became a guiding light to the people, but it soon burnt low. By the time Isaiah writes the law has become a fashion, a ritual without substance serving as a semblance of faithfulness. Isaiah pulls them up short calling on the people's honest and truthful fulfilment of the law.

The law has two sides. The first being its out working, completing the requirements of the law, living the way of the faith as defined by the law. Coupled with this is the spirit of the law, fulfilling its substantial requirements that will lead to a change in the world. That change is the ushering in of the kingdom of God as shown in the results of our actions, the heart with which the law is carried out. The feeding of the hungry, the care of the widow and orphan, the setting of prisoners free and the ushering in of the year of the lord's favour.

Isaiah's accusation is that the people of Israel, whilst fulfilling the duties of the law, were not adhering to its spirit. They kept the feast but they didn't bring closer the kingdom of God; they uttered the words but did not carry out the actions. They attended temple but didn't respond to the teaching they received.

Jesus speaks, in his Sermon on the Mount, of salt and light and law. The power of salt to bring flavour and healing, of light to bring illumination to the dark and guidance for the footstep, the law to direct us to God and the way of righteousness. The images themselves may seem quite strange though I would suggest they link very closely to the words of Isaiah.

Salt enhances flavour. It also meant survival. In the ancient world salt was extremely important. It preserved, healed, flavoured. Without salt we would die. Yet if misused or improperly stored, salt becomes useless, fit only for throwing out. We are described as the salt. Living right before God, fulfilling his call upon our lives, being honest in our faithfulness and truthful about our faith. This in turn means living by the way our faith leads us, even when that comes up against our own desires.

Light shows the way. But it has no use if covered. Part of living the faith is to be a light to the world. Without show or pretension, sharing the truth of the gospel with the world, a truth that is not judgmental or cruel but loving and inclusive. A truth that brings healing and wholeness, feeds the hungry, binds up the wounds, cares for the orphan and the widow.

The law is not to be taken away by the coming of the Christ. The Christ completes the law. The coming of the Christ renews the place and function of the law to lead the people along the way of righteousness and truth. The law is not a way to God in itself. The history of Israel as proved that. The law is another aid, another way of seeing the love of God in action in the

world. Honouring parents, serving neighbours, loving God, living honestly and respectfully of others, valuing life, being truly charitable.

Ok this all may seem obvious. However as usual the challenge is to each of us. We are heading towards Lent and the time of fasting denial, learning and preparation. We may be beginning to think about what our discipline will be. Giving up chocolate or alcohol or meat, taking something on, maybe a book to read, a course to study. The danger is we see these things like some kind of New Year's resolution. Something we hope to complete but maybe it'll last a week or two, maybe we'll see how far we get and if we make it to Easter that's an added bonus.

Our preparations for lent should be seen as an opportunity to come closer to God. To redress our relationship and seek new ways or improve existing ways of engaging with God, of being in a relationship with God. We should see this as a time set aside for us to get back into the life and spirit of being Christian, something that is not so easy to maintain, especially in the busyness of modern life.

In the same way Isaiah encourages the people of Israel to renew their relationship with God by a faithful fulfilling of the law, in the same way Jesus calls his follows to be salt and light and to see the Christ as the fulfilment of the law and the new revelation of God's love in the world, so we are encouraged to renew our life, no longer in fear of getting it wrong but the joy of knowing that, through Christ we have the way the truth and the light. Through times like Lent we can consciously take hold of this relationship and make it our own.

Today is the Fourth Sunday before Lent. That means in four weeks' time we will be entering that solemn period in the Churches life when we are encouraged to look at our relationship with God a fresh. To hear the words of the prophets like Isaiah who warn us of taking our faith complacently or lightly. And in a world that needs to hear the love of God it is our call to live and show that love to the world. We can do this through the discipline of faith.

Make Lent your own this year. Use the time and the opportunity to deepen your relationship with God; to renew your walk with Him who came to bring healing and wholeness, love and understanding to a world often broken and lost and confused. Then we can be a light on a hill, drawing others through your words and actions into the love of God. We can be salt that brings flavour to the world. We can see the law of God as one filled with love and understanding, a desire for growth in faith and the sharing of truth. "Let your light so shine before others, so that they may see you good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5.16)