

Many years ago someone – possibly an irreverent theology student – rewrote one of the collects in the Book of Common Prayer so that it read: O Lord, forasmuch as without thee, we are not permitted to doubt thee: grant us by thy grace to convince this whole race it knows nothing whatever about thee.’ These words sprang immediately to mind when I looked at today’s reading from Isaiah. Here is a community which has come back to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon. You’d think they would have learned something from this experience, but no. They reckon they know all about God. They know what he wants and how they have to behave. They know they are righteous – they know the law and they are sure they are obeying it. They pray, they worship, they expect God to approve their actions and intervene to make things go well for them. They go through the rituals – they ‘delight to draw near to God’ – but somehow all this virtue and piety isn’t having the desired results. They observe the holy days, but God isn’t looking. They prostrate themselves, tear their (suitably old) clothing and lie in the dust, making sure that everyone can see how holy they are, but God doesn’t notice. The more their priests urge them to meticulous observance of every minute detail of the law, the less attention God seems to be paying them.

Isaiah’s mission is to tell them, as in the words of that limerick, that they know nothing whatever about God. They have mistaken the letter of the law for the spirit of the law. As long as they look good – get the prayers right, display the symbols of fasting and penitence, they think it doesn’t matter how else they behave, or how they treat others. But this is not the law that God has made for his people. Their motivation, their commitment, their ‘fast’, should be to work for freedom, justice and compassion. Even more radically, this work is not for their own benefit, but to help others. They are already free and essentially in control of their own lives, but so many other people are not.

This isn’t just a challenge put to the members of a small near-eastern tribe 2,500 years ago. It resonates throughout the Bible, picked up by other prophets and underpinning the whole of Jesus’s ministry and teaching. Jesus condemns the Jewish leaders, wrong-footing them at every turn, whether he is healing on the Sabbath, eating with unsuitable people, pointing out their hypocrisy over adultery or castigating them for ignoring family obligations. Yet in today’s gospel he says that he has not come to abolish the law or the prophets. ‘Not one letter, not one stroke of a letter will pass from the law until all is accomplished.’ But the law is, essentially, the law of compassion, justice, mercy and love. It is as true for us now as it was for the disciples and in the time of Isaiah.

The opening of our gospel reading is misleading. It gives the impression that Jesus is talking only to his disciples. Not so – this is part of the Sermon on the Mount, and thousands of people are listening to him. Jesus tells the crowd that this is the law God wants them to follow. We are in essence part of that crowd. We too are the salt of the earth. Providing that we keep hold of our ‘saltiness’ – that spark of inspiration and commitment, that nudge that the Holy Spirit gives us – we can do great things. There may not be many of us, but a tiny pinch of salt spreads its taste a long way. We too are the light of the world, taking our light from Christ, the true light who came into the world so that everyone could believe. It’s our job to spread that light, not to keep it selfishly for ourselves (like reading with a torch under the bedclothes). Remember those lovely words we say when the candle is given at a baptism: ‘Shine as a light in the world, to the glory of God the Father.’

Isaiah tells us exactly how we are to be salt and light. Loose the bonds of injustice. Undo the thongs of the yoke. Let the oppressed go free. Share your bread with the hungry. Bring the

homeless poor into your house. Clothe the naked. Don't cut yourself off from your family. In other words, don't just talk about doing good. Do good. And I'm sure we all do good things. We give to charities. We donate to the foodbank. We help a neighbour, or visit someone who's lonely, or turn up for a stint at the night shelter or the Ivy Café. Opportunities are all around us, and given the seemingly unending range of needs, it is just as well that we each have different time available, and different skills and resources. But we have to work on long-term solutions as well as short-term fixes. It's all very well putting a bucket under the leaky pipe, but it's also a good idea to get the pipe mended. Or, as someone put it, it's helpful to fish a succession of drowning people out of a river, but at some point you really ought to walk upstream and find out why they are falling in. Taking action on the root cause of a problem can have wonderfully widespread results – like putting that pinch of salt into the tureen of soup. A civilised, prosperous society should not need foodbanks. Energy companies should not be making all-time-record profits at the same time that many of their customers daren't even turn the heating on. People to whom this country promised shelter and a new life in return for service in dangerous circumstances should not find themselves and their families crammed into single hotel rooms for months on end. I could go on – these are just three of the many oppressions and injustices that must be overcome. When we act as salt and light we are promised that God will guide us, the Spirit will inspire us, and that when we call for help our prayers will be answered. We must ask ourselves: 'If not now, when? If not me, who?' 'God has no hands on earth but ours', said St Teresa of Avila. It's time to get those hands dirty.