

“A hunger for better”

REFLECTION: March 23, 2025 Rev'd Ian Brown

Isaiah 55: 1- 9, Ps 63, Luke 13: 1 - 9

Saturday a week ago, we had our Car boot sale here. Even when there's other things going on, there's still some who can't help themselves from searching for a bargain. I was here looking to offload the last of my aunt's stamp collection - books of first day covers and more! It was good to chat with the bargain hunters and a few left happily loaded up with treasures! The world of commerce; buying and selling stuff has always been part of human activity. In the church we are mostly comfortable with fund raising for a good cause, but often still a bit wary, somewhat suspicious of trading and money.

Isaiah has clearly just been to the market and had the noise of the sellers still ringing in his ears when he wrote this,

‘Hey, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters. Come buy and eat!’

When the Prophet Isaiah writes to slaves, the poor and oppressed; “Hey, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters, you that have no money, come buy and eat! Come buy wine and milk without money and without price.” His words had some impact and some relevance! Today he might have added, 'come buy without tariffs!'

Isaiah is wanting to raise their downcast eyes and spirits, wanting to focus their attention on a hunger for higher things, now that he has their attention. This is getting at the really core issue of what we need as people. To the thirsty, Come to the waters! To the hungry, come buy and eat with no cost. To those in conflict, come, here is peace. To those threatened by force and brutality, come, here is protection.

The thirsty and the poor are invited to eat and drink. Lack of ability to pay cannot stifle this gift. Far more than water is on offer. Wine and milk, delightful things, for the taking! Imagine the sort of crowd these words could attract. Nothing is required of the purchaser and nothing is

demanded by the giver. What matters is listening and responding!

So, it's clear that Isaiah was not an economist!! Many would say, not a realist either! To buy without paying is not part of our world's system. Not anywhere! God's ways are clearly not our ways. But Isaiah is not speaking against shopkeepers and traders. These words are written to awaken a yearning for God's freedom and grace. They are addressed to people who have forgotten what to hunger for, who have lost all hope.

The enticing poetry of Isaiah isn't about the physical. He had the attention of his audience, then he goes on; “Listen carefully, and eat what is good, incline your ear so that you may live.”

It's the truth that Jesus quotes later, that people cannot live by bread alone. God promises life abundant, and the key to that life - is to be found in the spiritual nourishment of restored relationship with God. Jesus often spoke of heaven or the kingdom of God in terms of a great banquet where all are invited in the abundance of God's grace. An abundance of true nourishment, couched in terms of food.

Isaiah speaks too, of the need for a response; seeking the Lord; calling on him while he is near. The mystery of this offer is expressed in terms of God's ways being different to ours, our thoughts not like God's. This is the most astonishing point; God's ways and thoughts are focused on letting us seek God and having our ways become like God's. The invitation is made, the door is open, the cost is nothing!

To those who are thirsty and open to receive, God's invitation is like the best wine - or milk, or fruit smoothie if that's your preference! “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread and your labor for that which does not satisfy?” says the prophet. Probably more like the Psalmist, many of us will be feeling the need of refreshment, like we would in a dry and weary land. We are weary of violence and of hateful words and squirming leaders trying to look tough on everything.

And the voice of God, through Isaiah, whispers to you and to me:

“Incline your ear and come to me; listen, so that you may live.”

The style of policy God consistently shows, is one of giving - giving what is best - giving at great cost - but giving freely - it's all a matter of priceless grace. And it isn't the junk that's on special - what God is offering is a covenant, the top shelf stuff of provisioning and relationship. Have you seen the old movie, *Babette's Feast*? Babette prepares a thank you meal for the small and largely poor community she works in. She came into some money and all of it is spent on the most fabulous, home cooked banquet. The distrusting folk are won over, transformed by the experience.

“Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters, you that have no money, come buy and eat!” Isaiah says God offers a much better deal than anything we can imagine.

In the gospel, the background of the story is also suffering. Jesus is dealing with current affairs. Galileans had been slaughtered by Pilate while offering sacrifices! They played the blame game we still do; someone suffers? They must have done something wrong; they must deserve their lot somehow. Dorothee Soelle calls this “theological sadism.” But we do it to ourselves too, don't we? A bad turn: why is God after me? Health struggles: why isn't God helping me? So, how should we respond to suffering, to tragedy that's everywhere around us, to the dry and weary land or flooded muddy land we live in the midst of?

In Jesus parable of the fig tree, the gardener gives the old fruitless fig another chance, like Israel was given another chance after exile. Like Israel, invited to ‘incline your ear, listen that you may live’. The fig, in grace, gets tended another season, fertilized and then if there's no fruit next year, out it will come! It's an act of love and patience, an illustration of God's grace. But there is an expectation in the tone and there's an axe, but it's still in the shed.

Some like to focus on the threat here and say that God will get you if you don't do the right thing. We aren't fruit trees. I take comfort in the words of Isaiah, who says God will, “abundantly pardon.” And Julian of Norwich, the 14th century mystic, who said that ‘God has only one characteristic; love’.

I like this parable. It's full of options. Fruiting or not, chop it down or give it another chance. It's not doing anything except “wasting the soil.” But the gardener thinks a good feeding of manure might make the world of difference. Manure is smelly and awful but gardeners think of it differently. It's not as attractive as wine and milk, but manure can be useful.

Fertilizer has a purpose, trees in an orchard have a purpose. We have purpose, the church has purpose. The gracious invitation is not just to come to God's sumptuous feast and gorge ourselves. If we, like the fig are taking up space and giving nothing, now is a good time for some self examination. And answering the question of God's role in suffering and how we should respond, Jesus references the garden of second chances. Like Isaiah, lifting our eyes and our expectation.

In the face of the abundant offer of God, the overwhelming generosity, mercy and love, we are invited by the gospel, to reflection.

All in the context of God's gracious invitation and the grace of another chance. “Incline your ear and come to me; come, listen so that you may live. Seek the Lord while he may be found.” Amen.