

Isaiah 58:1-12 Matthew 5:13-20

“Sacrifice – What!? Why? How?”

Isaiah talks about on fasting. What’s that all about? Well, In today's reading, the Hebrew people have returned from exile in Babylon, and life back home disappoints them. The city is in ruins. Many are hungry, while wealth is hoarded by a few. In their disillusionment and despair, the people continue the fasts they formalized in exile, hoping to appease God who seems to have abandoned them. Through the words of Isaiah, God tells them what kind of faithfulness is required. Isaiah echoes the words of Micah in last week's reading. God does not call us to a spirituality of self-denial and abstinence, but rather to a spirituality of overflowing generosity and justice for the oppressed, the hungry, the poor, and the naked. Isaiah's message states clearly that we cannot claim to love God, if we do not love our neighbour in tangible ways.

Still confused and uncertain because things did not go well for them, they began to whine and complain to God. What, after all, did God want from them?

And, God told them. God pointed out that their way of fasting was making them quarrelsome and difficult, crabby and obnoxious with one another. Then, God suggested the kind of fasting he wanted – the only genuine style of fasting – “be just; free the imprisoned; share bread with the hungry; bring the homeless into your house [which is clearly going too far, God]; take care of your relatives.” This is real worship, the kind of sacrifice that God wants.

Isaiah was critical of his contemporaries for being all show and not enough substance in their religious rituals. Jesus went even further – in his sermon on the mount.

Today's passage offers two images from everyday life, to inspire our every day living - salt and light.

Notice that both salt and light are valuable, not in and of themselves, but because they are catalysts for a fuller enjoyment and appreciation of life. While we don't eat salt stew, nor do we stare fixedly into a light, we do enjoy stew made delicious by salt and we are able to see the beauty of the world because of the light that shines upon it.

As salt, we are to be what seasons and preserves life. Through deeds of love and justice, we are to become the light and hope of the world.

So, how are we doing? The Lord said of Israel, centuries ago: “day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practised righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God ...” In other words, the Israelites were all show and little substance - going through the motions of being God's people, but actually doing nothing of any value or meaning. Could we be accused likewise? Well – as long as there is injustice anywhere in the world; as long as there is oppression of any person; as long as one child, one family, one community is hungry; as long as anyone is without shelter, a home, clothes - if even one person dies from exposure in Managua or Calcutta or Toronto; then ... Where is our action, our substance?

How are we doing? A man recounts a dream, that realistically could be mine, perhaps yours ...



He says: "I dreamed that some friends and I were getting into Heaven together. Saint Peter said we were to wait at the gate for transportation. Each of us would be getting around in Heaven in a style related to our lives.

"Soon a white airplane landed. The back door opened and I could see a spacious interior with a flight staff and a well-equipped kitchen. I was anxious to get aboard that airplane, when Saint Peter called out 'Kenneth.'

"I was disappointed. Just then a big silver RV arrived. It was self-contained with air conditioning, kitchen with microwave oven, and bathroom with all the extras. I could really go places in this, but Saint Peter said, 'Jean.'

"I was trying to be understanding when a golden pickup truck pulled up. I drooled over the four-wheel drive and I wondered where you went off-roading in Heaven. I was about to ask if it had a tape player, CD or streaming when Saint Peter said, 'Muriel.'

"I saw that the means of transportation were getting smaller, and I had a vision of one of those multi-speed bicycles for myself – handmade custom frame with a cushioned seat and puncture-proof tires, balanced wheels, weighing less than 20 pounds.

"Just then Saint Peter handed me a pair of roller skates. Then he looked in his book again, shook his head absentmindedly, and took one of the skates back."

How are we doing?

Jesus said that anyone who breaks even one of the least of the commandments or who leads another astray would be called least in the kingdom of heaven. When I hear this, I wonder what hope there is for any of us.

And then I think about God's reaction to the broken world in which we live, to the brokenness and sinfulness of people like myself. And I see the bread and the cup at the table of his Last Supper with the disciples. I see our Lord standing at that table. I hear his voice, sharing with the disciples what the table means, because of the cross he would bear.

This table that stretches to connect us is a powerful symbol, or at least it should be. It is the table of Jesus Christ our Lord. It is a table of compassion and healing, of immense love. And any who are hungry, broken, hurting, searching, rejoicing are invited to this table - to be filled and restored.

Someone, talking of this table, wrote: "If a friend is one who summons us to our best, then is not Jesus Christ our best friend, and should we not think of the Communion as one of his best appeals to us to be our best? The Lord's Supper looks not back to our past with a critical eye, but to our future, with a hopeful one. The Master appeals from what we have been to what we may be. He bids us come, not because he sees we are better than we have been, but because he wants us to be. To stay away because our hearts are cold is to refuse to go to the fire till we are warm." [Maltbie D. Babcock]

This table prepared separately in our homes, but made one table because our Lord hosts the supper, is for all of us who live in a broken world, for us who have failed but who want to keep trying to be the salt/light of the world.

This table calls us away from the brokenness and the failures, calls us to repent and begin again.

May we think of this, today, as we celebrate the Lord's Supper together. Amen.