



Isaiah 1.10-18
Luke 19.1-10
3rd November 2019

The Uncomfortable Connection

Gracious God – may your Living Word come to us afresh this morning – so touch, we pray our minds and hearts with your grace and truth – through Christ our Lord and in the power of your Spirit. Amen

Imagine you lived a long time ago, in a different age, perhaps on the island of Jamaica where all your family were slaves. You usually went to your own meeting house and sang Spirituals on a Sunday. But once a year you were expected to attend the master's grand church in Kingston. You were his property, so how would it feel when the priest read the lesson all about being 'free' in Christ. Wouldn't there be an uncomfortable dis-connect.

Imagine not so long ago, just over a century in fact, worshipping in a Congregational Church here in Britain as a woman with significant gifts in preaching and pastoring, hearing the bible that day proclaiming that in the Christian community there is neither male nor female, we are all one in Christ Jesus. Even so, the man beside you can apply for ordination training but, although it's vital work, you must be content with Sunday School teaching. Wouldn't that be an uncomfortable disconnect?

And maybe some even in our own congregation just a few weeks ago whilst attending Harvest Festival, sang *All things bright and beautiful* but wondered if we here at AFC are doing enough to address the eco questions of our day. Even today, even in this place we may at times sense an uncomfortable disconnect between our liturgy and practise.

In a way that's the theme of Isaiah chapter one.

Although coming at the beginning of this book these words describe a time at the end, when the temple has been restored and the exile is over. Everything has been put back in place. The services are up and running and the prayers are being read. The sacrifices happen on time and at their appointed seasons. On the surface the liturgical life of the nation has been wonderfully and beautifully restored and yet...

This is what God has to say:

verse 11: I have no desire for the blood of bulls.

verse 12: Who has asked for all this?

verse 14: I loathe your new moons and your festivals.

Ironic isn't it? It's as if God goes to temple, synagogue, mosque or church and finds an uncomfortable disconnect.

At this point it may be worth saying that Isaiah One shouldn't be seen as the 'go to' passage for those who are merely against ritual or liturgy in worship. Neither does it present a blanket condemnation of Temple worship.

At other points in Isaiah it's as the writer is in those holy courts that he has a vision of God high and lifted-up.

Isaiah believes in worship, values worship and honours it. So, neither is he saying that it's only one's good and ethical life that really matters. He's not wanting to divorce liturgy and practise but rather to unite them. But in doing that he wants to make the point that we're in for an uncomfortable connection if we take these things seriously.

This chapter is essentially a call to us to unite our praise and action.

There used to be a vestry prayer that went something like this: *Lord, as we come to worship you this morning, help us to leave behind all our cares and worries and concentrate on you...*

Now I fully understand that prayer and in the past I've prayed it myself. It's a prayer wanting to dedicate a special and hallowed hour a week to God. Yet, I wonder if I really knew what I was praying when I said words like these because I no longer think that God wants us to leave our cares and worries at the church door. I think he wants us to bring them in. To offer them up in the silence of the intercessions, to shine the light of our bible readings upon them and place them under the scrutiny of our hymns.

Services like this one are many different things to different people and that's part of the joy and challenge of 10.30 on a Sunday morning.

To many of us it is, no doubt, Sanctuary Worship. A time to find peace and perspective in a busy and demanding week. Yet to all of us doesn't it also need to be Inspirational Worship – worship that inspires, motivates and equips us to return to work, family and community with a new sense of vigour and vision for how we can live a life that is positive and whole.

There was a tradition in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that some of the most liturgical and ornate churches were found in the slum districts of our great cities. These, almost cathedral like buildings, often from what was termed the 'Oxford Movement' of the Church of England, had colour and drama in their liturgy that drew in a crowd. But at one level they could also draw criticism, because weren't they out of place? Well, maybe not, because alongside this apparent ostentatious ritual these churches often provided great social justice ministry within their communities. It might have seemed like a disconnect: flamboyant

and formal worship in a run-down community, yet the priests and congregation who served in them often made a real contribution for good with those who lived on the edge.

I never tire of reminding myself (and you!) of that tradition in the Sisters of Charity, Mother Theresa's order, of walking straight from the morning eucharist out onto the streets to serve the poor and in doing so to deliberately and prayerfully make a connection between praise and action.

That is, I think, what Zacchaeus did in our Gospel reading today.

Isaiah urged those around him to: wash and be clean, learn to do good and pursue justice. It's a cry to put justice at the centre of our faith. They may be words of poetry, but they represent a lifetime of struggle towards a peaceable society.

I wonder who the diminutive Zacchaeus really was? Maybe he went regularly to the Jericho synagogue? If he did, I suspect he stood at the back un-loved and un-respected because he was a cheat and a thief. He had certainly heard of Jesus, so maybe Jesus had been spoken about over the pomegranate juice after Sabbath service. He was eager to meet Jesus and he did. Of all the people in Jericho Zacchaeus was the last person you might have thought who didn't need to make an appointment. Jesus just stopped by and it was an encounter of a lifetime.

How hollow the story would have been without the ethical resolution at the end. How empty would have been fine words without compassionate actions.

The story of this transformed superintendent of taxes is a blending of finding faith and living ethically. It is an example of what Isaiah meant when he wrote: wash and be clean, learn to do good and pursue justice.

And so Luke writes: Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord: Here and now, sir, I give half my possessions to charity, and if I have defrauded anyone, I will repay him four times over.

Little Zacchaeus turns out to be one of the New Testament's biggest examples of someone who made an uncomfortable connection in his life between faith and ethics, praise and action, worship and life style.

Our theme this morning has been Uncomfortable Connections as we've sought to seriously take note of Isaiah's call to all worshippers of God in any age to tie together the words of worship and the actions of life.

Back in 2003 our church in Malvern launched a carol competition for Christmas that year. We selected one tune – the Welsh folk song Suo-Gan and asked people to set some words about the nativity to it. Our great coup was that John

Bell, of the Iona Community, agreed to read through all the entries and award a first place in every age category.

Lots of us had a go at being 21st century Charles Wesleys all wanting to write a new Hark the Herald. So, most of us wrote words about angels, stars, shepherds and kings and we didn't win.

We should have known that John Bell, who regularly delivers thought provoking Thoughts for the Day on Radio 4, would always want something more up to date and cutting edge. He's a church leader who has striven to make uncomfortable connections in his life.

And so he chose Rosemary's carol. She had based it on the monthly Baptist Missionary Society magazine. She had read three or four stories of real people in different parts of the world and wove their struggles and joys into a great carol, and I know we are six weeks early but we are going to sing it in a few moments time.

Words about life as it really is and faith as it really can be. Let's just take verse 3:

Infant Marie, child of Andre, born to Esther here on earth
 Aids infected in Angola, tragic was your human birth
 Mother suff'ring, father dying, no help comes on med'cine's wings
 We will give our money for you; listen while the wide world sings.

There's a place for holly and ivy and three kings following yonder star, but there's surely also a place for a carol like Rosemary's that makes us see the birth of every child in every place as a nativity of note.

Isaiah's words echo in our ears today: wash and be clean, learn to do good and pursue justice. They urge us to make our own uncomfortable connects so that even as we sing hymns, we also consider our eco responsibilities. As we pray, we also think about shopping fairly or investing ethically. As we read the bible, as we finish the passage, we also commit ourselves to a life of forgiveness and faithfulness.

That's Isaiah's call and that's Zacchaeus' example. And may both be God's word to us today.

May it be so, in the name of Father, Son and Spirit. Amen