

ASH WEDNESDAY 14 FEBRUARY 2022

Isaiah 58:1-10 Matthew 5:13-20

Sometimes you come across a list of rules for doing things – the dos and don'ts of decorating/ 5 steps to perfect pastry/ 10 top tips for DIY etc

Did you know there are even Rules for Chocolate.

Here are some of them:

- Put 'eat chocolate' at the top of your list of things to do today. That way, at least you'll know you'll get one thing done.
- Diet tip: Eat a chocolate bar before each meal. It'll take the edge off your appetite and you'll eat less.

Oh that all rules were as attractive as that one to keep!

If we are to live in a civilised society we need to abide by the rules and laws of the land.

And as Christians we need guidance and rules for living that will keep us walking closely with God and lovingly with people.

The Old Testament is full of rules for life. The Israelites were seeking sanctification – they wanted to be right with God – and the way to do this then was to keep the Law of God.

One of the things they did was to fast as the Law commanded – and sometimes as the teachers of the Law commanded.

They fasted on the Day of Atonement, there were other annual fasts, and there were occasional fasts which were sometimes individual and sometimes corporate.

And the people came to think that fasting would automatically give them the right to a hearing from God.

This comes up in our Isaiah reading in verse 3 where the people are addressing God:

**³ “Why have we fasted,” they say,
“and you have not seen it?
Why have we humbled ourselves,
and you have not noticed?”**

But Isaiah points out very firmly that fasting in itself confers no rights or privileges if it is not done in the right spirit.

They had quarrelled when they fasted, they fell out with each other and they even had fist fights, they exploited their workers and everything they did regarding the fast was just outward show.

They were deluding themselves if they thought that that kind of fasting would get God’s attention.

He makes it quite clear that whatever they do they must do it from a heart motivated by love for him and love for others.

Rather than going without food, God would have been much more impressed if they had addressed the real issues of social justice in their midst – feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, giving shelter to the homeless and setting the oppressed free.

Just keeping rigidly to rules - that is, keeping to the letter of the law - isn't enough.

The heart and spirit of a person must be right with God first so that they are genuinely seeking his ways and then God will honour their faith and bless their efforts.

There however lies the rub.

Certainly for the Jewish people of Jesus' day anyway.

Because the only way they could get right with God was by keeping the Law in every possible way. But that was just impossible to do.

The so-called top religious people, the Pharisees tried but even they couldn't get it right.

And that's quite worrying because Jesus tells his disciples that **unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matt 5:20)**

So where do we go from there?

The Law is good and it was given to keep us living right and keeps society civilised.

But fulfilling it all in every detail is impossible for us – we just can't do it. [Has anyone even accidentally driven at 52 miles an hour in a 50 mile limit? If so you've broken the law.]

The truth is – and Jesus knew this –that no-one could get it right. Not then and not now.

True righteousness can never be earned and cannot be achieved by performing rituals.

It took an act of boundless love and fathomless grace to sort it all out.

And so here we are at the beginning of Lent, travelling with Jesus on the road to the cross, which did, of course, sort it all out.

But our journey starts with Jesus in the wilderness for 40 days, experiencing temptation, praying, no doubt and fasting.

Fasting like this clearly has its place – it can make room for prayer, sharpen spiritual awareness and prepare us for the work God has planned for us in the future.

And Jesus's wilderness experience was preparing him for the ministry that lay ahead, where he would demonstrate the kind of fasting God says on Psalm 58 that he has chosen.

To feed the hungry, loose the chains of injustice, set the oppressed free, doing away with the pointing finger, and all the other things it says in verses 6-9.

And we see the perfect example of the pointing finger in our gospel reading, the story of the woman taken in adultery.

The Pharisees and the teachers of the Law, who were scrupulous in their keeping of the Law, and no doubt fasted rigorously

whenever they were required to, dragged this poor woman out into the Temple courts where Jesus was.

Because she had broken the Law big style- a stoning offence. And some of them probably already had the stones in their hands and were eager to use them.

And they made her stand before the group. Probably not fully clothed, covered with shame and absolutely terrified.

No sign of the man she was with-even though she was taken in the very act of adultery.

This begs all sorts of questions. How did they come to find her – did they suspect her and then follow her as she met her man and then wait outside, listening at the door until the opportune moment?

If that was the case, why did they not compassionately seek to prevent it, rather than waiting for it to happen and then accuse and condemn?

And why did they not bring both the man and the woman?
Where's the justice in that?

And, not content with humiliating her, they then use this poor woman as bait in a snare to entrap Jesus so that they can accuse him.

Now these are the religious people who should know their scriptures well.

But they seem to have conveniently forgotten Isaiah 58 which urges God's people to loose the chains of injustice, clothe the naked, and set the oppressed free.

Instead, they point the finger and bay for blood.

That is about as far from the mercy of God as you can get.

And it is completely out of order, according to God's words in Isaiah.

But they are not listening.

Their hearts are set on upholding the law at all costs so they triumphantly seize this opportunity to get two at once.

They go for this pitiful woman and they go for this gentle teacher who in his public ministry so has been showing them how to deal with people with God's love, grace, compassion and forgiveness.

Just look through the earlier chapters of John and you will find example after example of this.

And it really infuriated the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees.

This upstart preacher, from Nazareth, of all places, a backwater, a place of no account. Why should they listen to him?

He openly broke the Sabbath by healing people during it, he cleared the temple of all the moneychangers as if he had the authority to do that, he declared himself to be the bread of life come down from heaven and claimed to be sent by God.

He was nothing but trouble and they wanted him dead. That was the only way to solve the problem of Jesus.

And they hoped they had cornered him with the plight of this terrified woman.

And that, they also hoped, would be one more nail in his coffin.

In the end of course, he utterly confounded them all. He refused to join in their condemnation - in fact he initially refused to respond to them – but they became more and more insistent.

So he stood up and spoke words of such wisdom and grace that his enemies became were silenced in an instant.

‘Let whoever is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her’ he said.

And one by one they all went away probably throwing the stones they carried on the floor.

And Jesus did away with every pointing finger and was left with only the woman still standing there.

Where are they now? He said. Does no-one condemn you?

And she said, no-one sir.

Then I don't condemn you either he said.

This woman who had been facing certain death – and a cruel and merciless one at that – had had her life turned around. All the

charges dropped with the stones. And no-one confronting her except the compassionate face of Jesus.

That surely is where we also should be.

Showing Christ's compassionate face to the world whilst we address the needs of our community with love and grace.

This is tough and sacrificial work. Treading the path of recognising and confronting wrong-doing when we see it but not in a self-righteous way.

Rather, in the way of people willing to recognise our own shortcomings too and so not condemning others but loving them from our hearts, wanting to show them that living in the love and forgiveness of Jesus is a much better way.

Jesus came not to do away with the Law and the Prophets but to fulfil them in every possible way in his own body, spirit, life and death – and then offer to us as a free gift the righteousness that that brings.

And this he did. And it took him to the cross. And that is what the cross was all about.

Paul puts it like this in Ephesians:

⁴ But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved. [Eph. 2]

And when I think of it, I always go back to the old song which dates back to 1895 which you have heard me quote before but it sums it up beautifully and succinctly:

Oh the love that drew Salvation's Plan

Oh the grace that brought it down to man

Oh the mighty gulf that God did span at Calvary

Mercy there was great and grace was free

Pardon there was multiplied to me

There my burdened soul found liberty at Calvary

That perfectly sums it up.

And we all daily live in the benefits of that amazing grace.

All we do should spring from grateful hearts for all that God has so graciously done for us and empowered us to live out our lives in the power and strength of the Spirit of God.

Good works like dealing with injustice, feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, and simply loving our neighbour. That is what touches God's heart.

And the more we do it, the more our light will break forth like the dawn, or to put it in New Testament language, the more we will shine with the light of Christ.

As we begin the journey to the cross with Jesus tonight, God grant us the wisdom and the grace to live like that.

Amen.

Isaiah 58:1-9 (NIVUK) True Fasting

58 ‘Shout it aloud, do not hold back.

Raise your voice like a trumpet.

Declare to my people their rebellion

and to the descendants of Jacob their sins.

² For day after day they seek me out;

they seem eager to know my ways,

as if they were a nation that does what is right

and has not forsaken the commands of its God.

They ask me for just decisions

and seem eager for God to come near them.

³ “Why have we fasted,” they say,

“and you have not seen it?

Why have we humbled ourselves,

and you have not noticed?”

‘Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please

and exploit all your workers.

⁴ Your fasting ends in quarrelling and strife,

and in striking each other with wicked fists.

You cannot fast as you do today

and expect your voice to be heard on high.

⁵ Is this the kind of fast I have chosen,

only a day for people to humble themselves?

Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed

and for lying in sackcloth and ashes?

Is that what you call a fast,

a day acceptable to the LORD?

⁶ ‘Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:

to loose the chains of injustice

and untie the cords of the yoke,

to set the oppressed free

and break every yoke?

⁷ Is it not to share your food with the hungry

and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter –

when you see the naked, to clothe them,

and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?
⁸ Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righteousness^[a] will go before you,
and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.
⁹ Then you will call, and the LORD will answer;
you will cry for help, and he will say: here am I.
“If you do away with the yoke of oppression,
with the pointing finger and malicious talk,
¹⁰ and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,
then your light will rise in the darkness,
and your night will become like the noonday.
¹¹ The Lord will guide you always;
he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land
and will strengthen your frame.
You will be like a well-watered garden,
like a spring whose waters never fail.
¹² Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins
and will raise up the age-old foundations;
you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls,
Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.

John 8 :1-11

¹ but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.

² At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. ³ The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group ⁴ and said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. ⁵ In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” ⁶ They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. ⁷ When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” ⁸ Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

⁹ At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. ¹⁰ Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”

¹¹ “No one, sir,” she said.

“Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”