

NEED FOR JUSTICE

Before we get to the *meat* of today's Bible reading we should say something about the *intro*.

"Jerusalem, your rulers and your people are like those of Sodom and Gomorrah!"
(Isaiah 1:10)

There's one way of getting people's attention!

It wouldn't have worked if Isaiah had said,
"Jerusalem, your rulers and your people are like those of Alloa and Clackmannan."

No one would have known what he was talking about.
Everyone would have been left scratching their heads.
What's that supposed to mean?
What's the deal about Alloa and Clackmannan?

But the old story of Sodom and Gomorrah related in Genesis 19 has gone down in history.

The expression would have been understood by people then.

But what about now?

You might want to suggest that everybody knows what that story is all about.
Homosexuality.

We've got the words **sodomy** and **sodomite** coming from the word Sodom.
As the church wrestles with the issue of sexuality the story is used or cited in our time by some people as proof that God hates homosexuals.

In the last few weeks there have been some very twisted and sick responses to the massacre in the gay bar in Orlando Florida. There have been youtube videos of Muslim and Christian clerics moaning that there weren't enough gay people killed. For them gay people are evil and they call them sodomites. There are even videos of Baptist pastors with straight faces saying that all sodomites are paedophiles and they all deserve to die.

Now while these deranged people will get little support from most decent folk around the world, nonetheless the myth persists that the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is all about sexual orientation.

So let me set this straight. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah has got nothing at all to do with homosexuality! Nothing!

This bizarre tale had to do with visitors coming to the city of Sodom and being attacked by the men of that town. These locals wanted to hurt and humiliate the visitors and threatened to have them gang raped.

Gang raping sometimes takes place in extreme situations like prisons or in war zones where the purpose is not to find sexual love and intimacy but to degrade embarrass and humiliate the victim.

The men of the city weren't homosexual – but they were hell bent on subjecting the strangers in their town to violence .

The Anglican Church in its website mentions this often misunderstood passage and states that this story is "not even vaguely about homosexual love or relationships", but instead "about dominance and rape, by definition an act of violence, not of sex or love."

When in later years Jesus mentions Sodom and Gomorrah to his listeners he speaks of their blatant disregard for strangers and their disregard of the laws of hospitality and acceptance. (Matt 10:14-15)

The thing that angered God in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah was that of gross injustice and the brutal mistreatment of innocent strangers.

And that is why Isaiah chooses to use this prefix to the point he wants to get across.

The people of Israel believe they are Gods people. They reckon themselves to be super-religious.

But Isaiah has got a challenge to make.

Being God's people does not just involve turning up at a place of worship, sticking in an offering, saying some prayers and praising God.

If we don't care about justice then our faith is worthless.

We may make out we are all spiritual, and we may get people believing us – but God is not impressed.

Our faith in God and our action to care for others around us are two things that cannot be separated.

It's interesting that our stance for justice can often act as a magnet to draw other people in.

If you think back to the early days of the church – when this group of people grew like wildfire – what was it that drew so many followers?

Was it that they were all looking for some new faith to believe in?

Was it that they were desperate to understand their Bible in a new way?

Was it that they wanted to get together with others to debate theology?

Eventually these things might have become important but this is not how it started.

The initial attraction, the initial spark, was the love, the care and the inclusivity of this new group and the way in which they cared for the poor and needy.

Tim O'Connor is on his way to Calais again bringing support and physical items to the refugees stranded there. As a church we have at short notice donated to

this work and we have been collecting here over this last week. But its not just us who have donated. People from our community have heard about this and they have been both happy and willing to donate.

They are glad that the church here is doing some practical work and giving them a focus to join in, and so its great that our church has helped lead this effort. It's as it should be.

This is one of the reasons why the church is here in the world.

A while back I watched a video on Youtube featuring the well known atheist Christopher Hitchens ,who died in 2011.

It was called something like "**Christopher Hitchens destroys religion**" and of course he never remotely does.

But this was an Australian TV show with a panel of people discussing whether it is possible to believe in God when there is so much suffering in the world.

Now Hitchens was the star of that show – he was the big draw and I hadn't even heard of any of the other panelists, (who were a mixture of people with faith and no faith) but one woman spoke up at one point. She said that she had travelled into many disaster zones, and she didn't believe in God, but there was one thing she had to admit.

Whenever there was suffering and trouble, the Christians were always there first. The Christians were always there first offering care and support and compassion. Wherever there was care going on the churches were at the heart of it.

Christians are mandated to care about justice issues.

Sometimes these issues appear before us as interruptions.

Suddenly there's an earthquake somewhere, and we weren't expecting it but weve just got to respond.

A news item comes in about a famine developing in Africa, and though its been building up for months we hear about it for the first time and we feel we should do something.

Justice issues do sometimes appear before us as emergencies and as interruptions to our normal lives.

But justice isn't just about interruptions.

Justice is what we are about.

Caring about issues of justice of fairness or sharing or rebuilding are things that matter to the people of God, and to those who want to be followers of Christ.

And there are so many issues we can highlight and all kind of ways we can get involved

from giving our money to donating our time,
 from befriending those who are ignored to standing up for others who are
 persecuted,
 from reading up on issues and discussing them with our friends,
 from joining support groups to organising events,
 or choosing to live more simply so that others may simply live.

As most of you know, I'm just back from Palestine. The band I am in were invited
 out to play at a music festival.
 It was a great experience – but also a harrowing one.

Because the situation that exists there is one of great and obvious injustice. Of
 course there is a back story to explain why Israel and Palestine are at
 loggerheads and some of it is complicated, but the bottom line is that in this area
 of the world one country dominates another in a way that is very unjust.
 Not that all Israelis agree with what is happening, or support the policies that
 amount to a kind of apartheid.
 I'm not really wanting to talk about this today but just to point out that here is
 one area of the planet where injustice is obvious.

But around the world and even within our own country so many issues are
 justice issues:

International trade relations,
 Austerity measures against the poor,
 Tax havens and tax avoidance by big companies,
 Starvation and lack of clean water,
 Foodbanks in our own country – one of the richest on earth,
 Spending billions on indiscriminate weapons,
 Prejudice against those who are different **whoever** they are – Christians
 Muslims, Buddhists, atheists, people of colour, gays or the disabled.
 Writing letters on behalf of Amnesty,
 Collecting on behalf of Christian Aid,
 Working in a centre to support the homeless
 The gap between rich and poor

Now we can't save the world singlehandedly.
 We can't respond to every appeal.
 We can't donate to every good cause.

So we have to ask for Gods help as we choose what we do.
 This applies to us as individuals.
 Its also true for us as a church.

But if we are taking our faith seriously we must get our hands dirty, and we must
 care for others and their needs.

Our actions in this regard matter as much as our worship and prayers.

This is what Isaiah is saying here in this reading, like many of the prophets of his day, and also what Jesus said in his own teaching and example.

Our faith in God and our action to care for others around us are two things that cannot be separated.

If all our faith asks of us is that we should turn up to a building to pray and worship then our faith doesn't amount to much in God's eyes.
If all we do is get involved in social action and forget about praise and prayers and worship then we become disconnected with God and our spiritual lives are less than they could be.
We need both things.

Here is what the prophet Micah said.
This is what God wants from us...

*"Seek Justice,
Love mercy,
and walk humbly with God."*

(Micah 6:8)

Here is how Isaiah 1:17 is translated in the Message version of the Bible.

*"Learn to do good.
Work for justice.
Help the down-and-out.
Stand up for the homeless.
Go to bat for the defenseless."*

Imagine someone asked you to finish this sentence.

"A Christian is someone who...."

There's lots of things you could say.

A Christian is someone who goes to church.
A Christian is someone who reads the Bible.
A Christian is someone who believes in God.
A Christian is someone who tries to follow Jesus.

All of these are good.

What about this.....?

A Christian is someone who cares about justice.

That may not seem like such an obvious thing to say.
But it should be.
It should be something that goes without saying.

A Christian is someone who cares about justice.

As long as that description is not widely recognised or understood, we need to keep reading this Isaiah passage. We need to listen again to the message of his words.

As long as that description is not widely recognised or understood, we Christians need to keep working to change perceptions

PRAYER

Great God,
in all our praise and prayers and worship
in all our actions of compassion and dealings with issues of justice,
keep us close to you.

Amen.

Isaiah 1:10-20

August 14 2016