

Thursday 4th June 2020

“What makes you think I want all your sacrifices?” says the Lord.

“I am sick of your burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fattened cattle. I get no pleasure from the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to worship me, who asked you to parade through my courts with all your ceremony? Stop bringing me your meaningless gifts; the incense of your offerings disgusts me!

“When you lift up your hands in prayer, I will not look. Though you offer many prayers, I will not listen, for your hands are covered with the blood of innocent victims.

“Wash yourselves and be clean! Get your sins out of my sight. Give up your evil ways.

“Learn to do good. Seek justice. Help the oppressed. Defend the cause of orphans. Fight for the rights of widows.”

Isaiah 1:11-13, 15-17

When Isaiah unleashed this withering denunciation, the impact on those who heard it must have been phenomenal. It was around 740 BC and the Assyrian empire was growing increasingly powerful, threatening to head southwards and invade Judah. Little historical evidence survives to provide detail of Assyrian life and times but all historians agree that they were merciless to those whom they conquered. With this on the horizon, instead of bringing a message of hope, Isaiah says that God will abandon Judah to its enemies.

That was shocking enough, but look at v.13 *“The incense of your offerings disgusts me!”* In the Old Testament, sacrifice and offering was viewed as the primary method by which one could become acceptable to God. It was a way of removing impurity, of making atonement, so that one could draw near to Yahweh whose presence was situated in the holy of holies. The rituals that surrounded these practices, how they were to be carried out, the types of offering to be made in response to certain circumstances, these were all prescribed in great detail (e.g. Leviticus 1-7; 11-15) and they formed a key part of the covenant relationship that Israel had with God. And here is Isaiah saying that the incense of the sacrifices was now detestable to God. Wow!

So what had Israel done wrong that meant that God was ready to abandon the land to destruction at the hands of the Assyrians (and ultimately the Babylonians) and its people to exile? Isaiah is in no doubt, laying the blame squarely at the feet of a ruling class who had neglected the poorer and more disadvantaged elements of society. *“Your hands are covered with the blood of innocent victims”* in v.17 and, later on in v. 23, *“Your leaders are rebels, the companions of thieves. All of them love bribes and demand payoffs, but they refuse to defend the cause of orphans or fight for the rights of widows.”* This is, above all, a demand that those in positions of authority end the social injustices that they had been perpetrating.

When we think of Isaiah as a prophet, we often think in terms of what he foretold; how his message foreshadowed the arrival of Christ. But prophets were, from the start, speaking the word of God to their current generation. In this passage, Isaiah is manifestly addressing the politics of 8th Century Judah as he saw it.

That is not to say, however, that his words became less relevant as time passed. The word of God has never existed in a political vacuum (and much less a social one). 800 years later, the Jesus of Mark's gospel openly addresses the political tensions between Roman and Jew, Pharisee and

Sadducee. For his part, Luke makes it clear that Jesus had come to help the blind, the lame, the misfits, the disempowered, the abused, the socially outcast.

So we too, as we look at events both overseas and closer to home, need to be mindful of the fact that oppression and injustice remain as evident today as they ever have been; and that they remain as hateful to God as they ever were.

How should we react? Sometimes we might find ourselves, like Isaiah, in a position to speak truth to power. Even if we are not, however, let us all take it upon ourselves to commit to following the injunction laid down by Isaiah over two and a half thousand years ago: *“Learn to do good. Seek justice. Help the oppressed. Defend the cause of orphans. Fight for the rights of widows.”*