

Seek justice * Isaiah 1

October 25, 2020 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

The passage that we're looking at this morning hits uncomfortably close to home. Isaiah is talking about a culture where justice has given way to self-interest, where truth is what we make it/has become negotiable and where we traded what's right for what's profitable. That's Ancient Israel before the Exile. But that's our culture too. And God doesn't like it.

Join me in Isaiah chapter one and I'll show you what I mean. Isaiah's a big book so it should be easy to find. After the psalms but before Jeremiah. Isaiah, chapter 1 and we're going to start around verse 11.

Now Isaiah chapter one picks up where we left off last week. Just like in Amos, God, through Isaiah, condemns Israel for their empty worship. Verse 13 - 13 Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations-- I cannot bear your evil assemblies.

14 Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them (Isa 1:13-14 NIV).

Just like in Amos, God hated their worship. And just like in Amos, we know *why* God hated their worship. It's because their ritual action was not backed up by ethical action. Their Mon-Tues-Wednesday actions showed that their hearts were in fact far from God.

And again, just like in Amos, we have a catalogue of what they were up to. Look down at verse 21 –

21 See how the faithful city has become a harlot! (Jerusalem! The city of God! The city on a hill, enjoying God's blessings and radiating them out to the nations! It's become a faithless mess). She once was full of justice; righteousness used to dwell in her-- but now murderers!

22 Your silver has become dross (that's the impurities that rise to the top in molten metals), your choice wine is diluted with water.

23 Your rulers are rebels, companions of thieves; they all love bribes and chase after gifts. They do not defend the cause of the fatherless; the widow's case does not come before them (Isa 1:21-23 NIV).

Do you see what's happened here? These people have wandered far from God and so their ways are far from His.

Faithfulness has given way to faithlessness, justice to self-interest.

What was good has become corrupted; what's true – dropped in favour of what's profitable - and the leaders of the people have decided to look out for themselves and no one else.

Justice is not being done and God doesn't like it. HIS people should reflect HIS priorities and He is a just and righteous and faithful God. And while these people attempt to appease Him in church, He sees right through their acts and condemns the injustices of their culture.

And He does the same for us too.

Faithfulness has given way to faithlessness, justice to self-interest.

What was good has become corrupted; what's true – dropped in favour of what's profitable - and the leaders of the people have decided to look out for themselves and no one else.

Sound familiar? Every time a person deceives another for their own benefit, God sighs. Every time a leader gives a contract to the company that bought him off, God shakes His head. Every time a person does violence to another, God mourns. This is not the way it should be.

Our nation, our neighbourhoods, our churches, our lives should be marked by justice. By what's far and right and good. But we know all too well, don't we, that that's not always the case.

We know that, God knows that, and He's not impressed.

In fact, it was just this kind of injustice that led Israel into Exile. God said 'you, my beloved children, whom I have rescued from the gutter and treated you like royalty – you're still treating each other like garbage – and that's not right.' And He gave them time to repent, but, they just kept on doing it and so off into Exile they went.

Injustice draws God's wrath. And that wrath is pointed straight at our culture too. There might not be an Exile into Assyria, but there will be a reckoning at the end of time where every person needs to account for their every action.

So what do we do?

Two things – one spiritual and one practical.

First, God is not only wrathful; He is also merciful. He is willing to forgive. He is willing to deal with our injustices and give us a new heart so that from then on, we will long to do what is right. Verse 18 - 18 "Come now, let us reason together," says the LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. (Isa 1:18 NIV). Verse 25 - "...I will thoroughly purge away your dross and remove all your impurities."

God Himself says "I will cleanse you from the inside out. I will forgive your injustices and put things back the way they should be."

And that's exactly why Jesus came. He died, experienced the Exile, the separation from God that we deserved, so that we could be restored to Him. Sins forgiven, impurities cleansed, hearts made new and eager for what's right.

That's God's first answer to this problem – to restore people and bring them back to Him – and here's the second one – so that they will seek justice themselves. Jesus died to see that cosmic justice was done; God longs to see justice in action in our world; and we who are renewed now have the responsibility to act justly in our world. Each and every one of us should be agents of justice in a selfish and unjust world.

Look at verse 16: 16 wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, 17 learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow (Isa 1:16-17 NIV).

God says to us – "Now that you are spiritually clean, YOU clean up your act in the 'real world.'" Jesus washes us white as snow but we still need to apply that in real life. And so here's what God says to do.

Stop doing wrong; learn to do right. There are some inequalities and prejudices that we grow up with, that are so deeply ingrained, that we need to relearn what's right from God's perspective. We need to carefully evaluate our unconscious thoughts about different people and ethnicities and say 'is this the way God sees these people?'

We need to seek justice, to be a part of the solution, not a part of the problem. We need to resist racist stereotypes and stand up for people who have no power.

We need to defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow, set food before the orphan and extend a hand to the refugee. We need to 'let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!' like God said in Amos 5:24. We need to seek justice just as God does.

Now listen, I don't know your innermost thoughts, but what I can see outwardly suggests to me that I'm preaching to the choir here. I get the impression that we as a church are standing on God's side here, eager to see justice done, eager to see life unfold as fairly as it can this side of eternity. I think that we are willing to lay down our privilege and use whatever power we have to help other people with less.

And so I think I need to tweak my message just a little to say – seek justice just as God does, even if no one else does.

I think we're making progress, but I know that that's not true for your neighbours, your co-workers, your friends, your family. Some of them at least. And the way of the world is to put profit before truth, self-interest before self-sacrifice. And it will be so tempting to join in. To say, 'well, it's ok for me to exercise my privilege here because everybody else is doing it. It's ok for me to hold these secret prejudices against a person because everybody knows it's true. It's ok for me to cut the corners or stack the deck in my favour because that's just what you do.'

No. Seek justice, just as God does, even if you're the only one. Stand against the tide of racism and oppression and do what's right. Resist the urge to go with the flow and use your privilege as pretty well-off westerners to help people who have less. Absolutely, you have to use wisdom and discernment in this process, but rearrange your mind to make your first thoughts are justice and mercy.

And know that you're not alone. I want to act justly. Nod your head if you want to act justly. We will seek justice as a church and know that God does too.