Christ creates a generous, open community of belonging where all are safe

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Pentecost + 9 – Isa 1.1, 10-20 – Ps 50.1-8, 23-4 – Heb 11.1-3, 8-16 – Lk 12.32-40

It’s lovely to be back here with you all. Week by week during our absence, you’ve faithfully gathered here to worship God with your usual care and friendly joy. I’m very grateful to all of you who’ve seen to that.

Those services have often been a pleasure we’ve shared with you online as we’ve responded to the text message that St John’s has gone live. We’ve been in lots of places over the past months, had some wonderful experiences and learnt a huge amount. Thank you for helping to enable that.

Some time ago, I started looking at the Bible passages set for today and I worried about how they’d come across. People often tell me they struggle with the God of the Old Testament, and today, Isaiah’s in full flight letting us have it. *Isa 1.15 When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.* They’re confronting words. I worry about how the kind, faithful people of St John’s feel when this is read out at them?

Lots of people have trouble with Old Testament portrayals of God, and I worry that today’s readings contain just the sorts of sayings that drive people away from reading the Hebrew Scriptures. It’s unfortunate that we don’t get to hear these readings in their full context.

In this case, we need to be aware of the oppression of poor peasant farming families back then by a rich, politically-connected religious elite. Isaiah is saying what God feels about corrupt Temple priests who required compulsory offerings three times a year from these poor people. And *they* set the level of offering, *not* the peasants; the poor people had no option to say they couldn't afford it.

So you might understand God's disgust at these priests as they offered sacrifices which cost *them* nothing, but left many farming families destitute? That's where the strength of the language comes from.

But that was thousands of years ago; what's it got to do with today? I heard similar words to Isaiah's at the Receptive Ecumenism conference. A distinctive focus of RE is that we seek healing from other traditions for the wounds and failings of our own churches.

One speaker – a Pentecostal professor from the USA – told us *Pentecostals have wounded, dirty, bloody hands; they've lost some of their inclusiveness, and have become more identified with fundamentalism and nationalism*. One practical outworking of that was their participation in the religious right's support for Donald Trump. She was gutted to have to own this. Her words *bloody hands* echoed Isaiah's!

Our tradition has blood on its hands too. Our history as a church putting its prestige first and protecting paedophiles is just one case in point.

So should we want God's view voiced any less forcefully than Isaiah put it today? I think not. But without access to historical context and such a present-day parallels, Isaiah can be hard to read.

The difficult readings don't stop with him today. Isaiah and our gospel both recall last week's warning parable from Luke 12 about the rich farmer. I shudder at the way 'giving texts'

like this used to be brandished in stewardship campaigns. People felt hounded by a Church that just seemed to be after them for their money. Historical context helps us to read these texts too in a way that Jesus might have wanted us to.

At the New Testament conference last week, Prof John Barclay gave an extraordinary paper about the social significance of giving in the time of Jesus. He started by talking about a 2nd century writer called Artemidorus who interpreted people's dreams; people from all walks of life.

Unusually for an ancient writer he didn't just deal with rich, influential people, so he opens a rare window onto the world of ordinary people in antiquity. Many dreams he interpreted from poor people revealed that *their deepest desire was to be able to give*. That's interesting!

Prof Barclay spoke of a strict social convention in the ancient world about reciprocity and equal exchange. It was so strict that many poor people weren't just denied life's chances like poor people are today, but in their inevitable, frequent times of crisis, they got locked out of almost all social relationships.

To survive, you needed *'a network of mutual support, where you could hope for material aid from relatives, neighbours, and friends on the assumption of a commitment to help them when they needed it.'* The ability to give and receive on equal terms decided if you belonged in society or not.

So when Jesus calls people to give, he's saying something quite different from what we might have heard during the Gospel reading. It's not about making us feel guilty, it's caring about our survival; about helping us to belong. We need to belong. In the majority / poor world, this value persists.

We all have stories of being in tight situations where help has been offered just when it was needed. And like many of

you, I’ve heard travel stories where the people who gave help were extremely poor. What they gave represented a really significant part of what they possessed, like a whole week’s food.

So today’s scriptures don’t confront us with the challenges we might have felt when we first heard them today. But they do confront us. They bring us face to face with God’s passion for justice for the poor, and for rehabilitating the rich and powerful: face to face with God in Christ who would go to the Cross to create a generous, open community of belonging where all are safe.

We are called to be that community here and now. Amen