

Live out God's vision, defiantly and joyously

Rev'd Peter Balabanski

Pentecost + : Isa 1 – Ps 50 – Heb 11 – Lk 12

Today's readings offer us two of western society's pet aversions; the first is the angry-sounding God, and the other is the call of Jesus to sell our possessions and give the money to the poor. It's good to tussle with these issues. What do we do with the wrathful God we meet in the prophet's writings and in the Psalm; how can we integrate this God with our idealised image of the God who loves us all unconditionally? And secondly, what do we do with Jesus' command to give?

The eighth-century prophets we've been reading lately link these issues through their two deepest concerns: being faithful to God, and social justice. What links them is that for the prophets, being faithful to God meant living a life of complete loyalty to the God of the Exodus: the God who had brought their ancestors up out of slavery in Egypt. In the Exodus, God had shown an absolute commitment to the Israelites, even though they were nobodies – they were slaves. In the view of the prophets, the natural response to God's love and kindness was to respond with love and faithfulness/loyalty of our own.

Yet everywhere the prophets looked, they saw idolatry and injustice. They had to teach the people to show love and loyalty to God. But how might the people best express this? The prophets taught that the best way to express loyalty to God was by practising social justice. They taught that a loving, faithful response to God was best articulated by dealing kindly with the nobodies in their own society, just as

God had dealt with them when they were nobodies in Egypt. And this was to be their proclamation to the nations – we are a just and kind society because our God is just and kind.

Like all the great themes of the Hebrew Scriptures, these three intertwined themes of the prophets – loyalty to God, social justice and proclamation – these themes draw their meaning from God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12.1-3:

¹ *Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ² I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'*

Here's the whole reason for the Hebrew people: God chooses them, loves them and blesses them so they will be a blessing to all families of the earth; so all creation will know the blessing of a union with our creator, just as God's people enjoy union with the creator.

This is why social justice lay at the heart of the prophets' preaching. The chosen people were to reflect God's universal love to all creatures first by living it in their own society. This is where Isaiah of Jerusalem is coming from when he cries out: ¹⁷ *learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, and plead for the widow.*

Perhaps now we can approach the writings of the prophet without our wrath-proof goggles on. As it happens, the words wrath and vengeance don't occur in the passage we've heard this morning, and yet there are undoubtedly some of us who heard these words, even so.

The God who is revealed in the prophets is admittedly upset.

But God has a repertoire of emotions that's far wider than just love and anger, and so our response is correspondingly invited to range far wider than just adoration and fear. The God we meet in the prophets is more often than not a God who feels humiliated and shamed by the public conduct of the chosen people; a God who feels injured and betrayed and misrepresented. How can creation come to know the creator if the witness borne by the chosen people is corrupt and hypocritical?

And yet this God perseveres with them: ¹⁸ *Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.*

God remains determined that these people who any other self-respecting authority would dump will be the means by whom *all families of the earth are blessed*. God will see this through whatever the cost! So when Jesus, in today's gospel says: ³²*Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom.* ... there can be nothing of which his listeners could be more certain.

But it's what Jesus teaches us to do with this certainty that's at once most predictable and most bewildering. ³³ *Sell your possessions, and give alms.* His message is the same as Isaiah's. Social justice is the way for God's people to proclaim who God is. It's predictable because it's the same message as has always been preached among God's people. Yet it's bewildering to us because it's a message founded on certainties revealed in the past – God's promise to Abraham; God's rescue of the chosen people from slavery in Egypt. It looks to the past.

Paradoxically, we live in a society where would-be prophets and gurus tell us the certainties that count must be future certainties. They tell us the search for security must focus

on the future – to rock-solid investments and superannuation schemes that will keep us going when the pension system as we know it has dried up. We even sell things called futures, whatever they are.

And it's here that Jesus' message becomes most challenging of all – most counter-cultural. ³³*Make purses for yourselves that don't wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.* ³⁴*For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.* This is a challenge to us as individuals to live out, but also for us to speak out as a direct challenge to the would-be prophets of our time – powerful political and commercial interests that always want to direct our eyes to the future; or, at any rate, their vision of the future. The future can't be predicted, and yet they want us to trust them to shape it. Their advertising and slogans portray the future as a dangerous place if we don't enter it under their protection. And we follow, generally. Is it any wonder God is upset?

Jesus' words call us to resist these false prophets: to catch a vision of the love God has shown us and all creation, and to respond by living out of that vision, defiantly and joyously; to be empowered by this vision, and to express it through social justice. *Because* this vision shows us how much God loves us, it can free us to give; to give in defiance of the fear our modern prophets would trap us in. We can even capture a completely new vision of what treasure actually is.

The saint we celebrated yesterday was St Lawrence, a deacon martyred in 258 CE, during the persecution of the Roman emperor Valerian. The emperor had demanded that Lawrence surrender the treasures of the Church to him. Lawrence, feisty like all deacons, gathered lepers, orphans and blind people and bringing them to the emperor, said: 'Here is the treasure of the Church.'

Amen