

THE RIGHT WORSHIP

10th August 2025

(Proper 14C)

READINGSⁱ

Isaiah 1:10-17

Hear the word of the Lord,
 you rulers of Sodom!
Listen to the teaching of our God,
 you people of Gomorrah!
What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?
 says the Lord;
I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
 and the fat of fed beasts;
I do not delight in the blood of bulls
 or of lambs or of goats.

When you come to appear before me,
 who asked this from your hand?
 Trample my courts no more!
Bringing offerings is futile;
 incense is an abomination to me.

New moon and Sabbath and calling of convocation—
 I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.
Your new moons and your appointed festivals
 my soul hates;
they have become a burden to me;
 I am weary of bearing them.

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.

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
 remove your evil deeds
 from before my eyes;
cease to do evil;
 learn to do good;
seek justice;

rescue the oppressed;
defend the orphan;
plead for the widow.

Mark 11:15-18

Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves, and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple.

He was teaching and saying, "Is it not written,
'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'?
But you have made it a den of robbers."

And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him, for they were afraid of him because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching.

Luke 12:32-38

"Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

REFLECTION

(Rev. Toby Keva)

Let me tell you a real story about a man in the area where I used to live in Indonesia where I came from. He was a very wealthy man. But he became wealthy illegally. He built his wealth by acquiring vacant lands that didn't belong to him, building houses on the lands, and then selling them to other people. Needless to say that he made a lot of money from his illegal trade.

Now, I had never met the man—yet, I heard that he was a member of a local church and, many believed, he donated a large sum of the money he obtained illegally to his church. I guess, by donating some of his money away to his church, he tried to 'clear' his conscience so to speak.

Sadly, the church complied. If you go to the area where I used to live, you can see, from a distance, a big church building with a pointed spire that looks like a cathedral. But it is not a cathedral—which is usually the main church of a denomination. It is an ordinary local church that had been renovated extensively using the dirty money.

Now, whenever I read the reading that we have from the book of Isaiah, I think about this man. See, in our reading, Isaiah was addressing a similar situation. No, the prophet Isaiah was not against worship in itself—although many today may feel rather offended by the practice of sacrificing animals in a place worship. Isaiah was against using worship to cover one's evil activity. He was against the misuse of worship.

The people of Israel back then expected that, by sacrificing animals in the temple, God would forgive their sins; they hoped that, by participating in the animals sacrifice in the temple, their guilt would be wiped clean and they would be 'free' to commit another sin once again. Many were taking an advantage on a 'loophole' in their religious law.

But Isaiah closed the loophole for good. He reminded them that their worship could not be separated from their daily life. For him, true worship did not involve dedicating animals to be sacrificed in the temple; for Isaiah, true worship involved dedicating one's life to justice in the world.

For Isaiah, people could not acquire God's favour by offering sacrifice in the temple; for him, God's favour was won when people "cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." (Isaiah 1:16-17 NRSV)

See, a prophet like Isaiah did not benefit from the sacrificial system in the temple, which had become a big business by then. No wonder that the prophets were often the most vocal critics against animals being sacrificed in the temple because they were not part of the religious establishment in Israel.

This was the backdrop that we need to remember when we read the story about Jesus' turning the tables of the animals traders upside down in the temple's courtyard. By turning the tables upside down, Jesus was aligning himself with the prophets before his time.

Like Isaiah, Jesus was not satisfied with the outer performance in public worship. Jesus demanded an inner change of heart, a repentance of the self. He was not impressed by any kind of spiritual 'transaction' that did not involve one's transformation.

Friends, people today are very attuned to any incongruity between what we believe and how we live. No wonder that, for many people today, the call for a just and ethical living is not a matter of left/right wing political agenda; for them, it is a matter of choice that will define their life and world today and in the future.

Indeed, the call for justice is embedded in our spiritual calling. The call for a righteous life is a fundamental part of our calling as Jesus' followers.

Let us take for example the abolitionists—those who were against slavery and tried to abolish it. Many of them were committed Christians—those who could not reconcile the principles that they learnt from the Scriptures with the reality they faced in their world. So they tried to shape their world to conform to the ideals that they found in the Scriptures.

And these devout Christians were not merely followers of the anti-slavery movement then; they initiated and organized the movement; they were the leaders who were at the forefront of the movement.ⁱⁱ

The Quakers, for example, were early leaders in anti-slavery movement.ⁱⁱⁱ Many members of the Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches also freed their slaves long before owning a slave was made illegal.^{iv} We should be proud to have these people as our forefathers and mothers in faith.

It should have come as no surprise, however, that the anti-slavery movement in the US and Europe was met with fierce opposition from many parts of the society then. And at the heart of that resistance was fear; fear that abolishing slavery would have a detrimental effect on the economy—an economy that had been highly reliant on slaves for thousands of years.

What was true then is still true today: that the number one reason that often stops us from living a righteous life is fear; more specifically fear for our own well-being.

But, in Luke's Gospel, Jesus reminds us to put our ultimate trust in God; to trust that living a life that adheres to the values of God's Kingdom will not lead us to ruin. On the contrary, it will lead us to a rewarding life.

Friends, true worship occurs when our life is shaped by the nature and character of the God whom we worship. True worship occurs when we adopt the righteous way of living as God's people in the world. Our spiritual and religious life cannot be separated from how we live our life. They are two sides of the same coin.

A couple of years ago, I went to a retreat in New Norcia, which is the only monastic town in Australia. During the course of the retreat, I met the Benedictine monks who lived in the monastery. These monks followed a very strict routine of daily communal prayer in their chapel. As far I remember, their very first prayer was before 5 am!

I tried to follow their prayer routine once. I failed miserably. I skipped some of their prayer times, especially the very early morning ones!

But praying is not the only thing they do. The monks were also busy, working amongst and for the community in New Norcia. The last Spanish monk there, Dom Paulino, was a well-known baker, shoemaker, and producer of olive oil.^v See, for the monks, their work with and for the community had always been a fundamental part of their spiritual life. Their work was a significant part of their prayer.

The letter of James (2:17) tells us that "Faith without works is dead." Likewise, worship without ethical and righteous living is pointless. True worship happens when what we pray for in a place of worship like the church matches the way we live our life outside of the church's walls.

Amen.

ⁱ New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition of the Bible.

ⁱⁱ From *Christian Abolitionism*, an article in Wikipedia the free encyclopedia, accessed: 5/8/22, 4:05 pm.

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^{iv} From *Christian Abolitionism*, an article in Wikipedia the free encyclopedia, accessed: 5/8/22, 4:05 pm.

^v From *New Norcia, Western Australia*, an article in Wikipedia—the free encyclopedia, accessed: 5/8/22, 4:24 pm.