

SERMON, ST LEONARDS
10th AUGUST, 2025

Isaiah 1.1, 1.10-20

Ps. 50: 1-5; 23-24

Hebrews 11.1-3, 11.8-16

Lk. 12:32-40

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer...

I have had the pleasure of attending General Synod twice now as a member. "Pleasure" is really a courteous term for an experience that is often challenging and even disconcerting. Our church is a diverse one, a diversity that is natural to Anglican identity and, while it ought to be a joy to encounter and learn from different Christian experiences and perspectives, sometimes the challenge is not so positive. An experience at my first General Synod remains with me. We had been organised into tables of discussion groups that met every day. The groups had been carefully mixed and matched to ensure that there was, in

each of them, an expression of the theological, cultural and gender diversity across the Australian communion. It was an earnest attempt to ensure that like did not always talk to like, that people did not retreat into their theological bubbles but instead develop understanding, empathy, and perhaps even friendship and so mitigate the worst excesses of Synod debate. While I cannot remember the nature of the conversation, one comment made in those groups has stuck with me ever since. An able, articulate and intelligent woman from a diocese on the other side of the country remarked that her relationship with God was grounded on fear. She feared God's righteous anger; she feared God's judgement. That fear coloured her faith and its expression in every way. I know she reads the Bible diligently, and yet I wonder just how she would read this morning's gospel reading. Listen to how it begins: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom".

These eighteen words say so much. They are deeply laden with profound meanings and teachings about the expression of God, divine grace, and the nature of salvation. Jesus has been talking about temporal worries: the things that we, all of us, can get bothered and stressed by at different times in our lives. Jesus' message in the verses leading up to this has been simple: put things in perspective. Why stress about what you eat, or what you wear, or even your health? That's what the world worries about. And here, Jesus draws an important contrast which is so central to his teaching: strive for God's kingdom, and the rest will be taken care of. That is what Jesus has been saying when he then continues with the words which I cited a moment ago, and it's worth repeating them: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom".

If we backtrack a bit and recall the sentiments of the reading from Isaiah, here we have an unambiguous condemnation of formalised religion. This text was composed in the kingdom of Judah some time in the later eighth century BC. Judah, with its

capital at Jerusalem was the less powerful of the two Jewish kingdoms, but its rulers were of the line of David and the great temple in Jerusalem was under their control. Possession of the Temple may have led to the kinds of attitudes that the prophet is condemning since, at the heart of these, seems to be the view that if the correct formalities are observed, God will look kindly upon the kingdom. It is precisely this attitude that the prophet abhors. Isaiah repeats, like a refrain, the message of Hosea, Micah and Amos, the prophets who were his contemporaries: formal worship is offensive to God while the poor go unfed, orphans and widows go unprotected, and the exploited go unaided. Isaiah's message is clear: formal religion and obedience to codes without inner transformation is blasphemous because it assumes that God can be put into a box, can be placated by platitudes. I remember many years ago hearing a parish priest tell the story of his first time at a meeting of his local Rotary club. "Hullo," said one of the men there, "What do you do?" (apparently ignoring evidence of clerical collar). The priest replied "I'm the rector of St Swithun's". "Oh", said the man, "You're in religion. I'm in real

estate myself". That is the approach that Isaiah is addressing: that faith is mere religion – a matter of getting the practices done so that otherwise we can get on with the kind of life that pleases us.

That is the way of the world: to do enough to satisfy apparent requirements and no more. God is here, at best, an impersonal force. There is no relationship, no understanding that God might actually care. To Isaiah, it is plain that God does care, that God is reaching out, ready to forgive and restore prosperity and security, a forgiveness that is contingent only upon the people of the land returning to the fulness of their own relationship with God.

To return to the Gospel, Jesus clearly contrasts the ways of the world (the Greek word is *kosmos*) with that of the Kingdom (in Greek, *basileia*). It is the world, the *kosmos*, that generates stress about getting enough things to meet our needs; in the Kingdom, such matters are secondary. What matters is how we use the things that we have – do we use them purely to protect ourselves

or to share with those who have less. This is not far distant at all from the point that Isaiah makes and, I think, challenges us all to think about what our faith means to us and how we go about living it out. Ours is a world and a culture which, by and large, finds excuses for not looking after the marginalised: the unemployed are shiftless and don't want to work; refugees are after our money or our jobs or our culture; the mentally ill need to pull themselves together. I'm sure that you have heard these kinds of sentiments more than once in the past and they are a convenience, an excuse, a species of victim-blaming so that we do not have to exercise any form of sympathy, let alone empathy.

But these are the people to whom Jesus naturally gravitated: social outcasts like lepers or tax collectors; people marginal to first century Jewish society like women and gentiles. The Gospel of John tells a really helpful story here. When his disciples asked him whose fault it was that a man was blind from birth, Jesus said it was no-one's fault and healed him. The disciples saw

imperfection and sought for a reason; that is how the world works. Jesus saw need and responded. That is the Kingdom.

And the irony is that all that religion, all those sacrificed animals and pumped out prayers designed to keep God happy enough do not matter one little bit. Jesus addresses his listeners as “little flock”. The imagery of Jesus as shepherd is common enough in the gospels; here by using the phrase, his listeners’ vulnerability and dependence is stressed, and yet he then says to them: “It is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom”. Notice here that Jesus says “your Father”, not “the father” or even “our Father”. Us. The vulnerable ones; the ones who might live in fear of a vengeful God. But God is not the wolf; God is our Father, close to each of us, at least as close as we allow God to be. God wants to give us everything; it is God’s “good pleasure” to do it. This is the gracious act of a loving God who knows us all inside and out. The “Kingdom” is ours. All we have to do is take it. This is not the angry and terrifying God with which I began this sermon. This is not a God of fire and sword. This is the God who

reaches out arms of divine love and begs us to take them; who longs for our trust. This is the God who will wait upon us in the heavenly banquet, as Jesus says in the final verses of today’s Gospel. This is the God who took on our humanity, became subject to time and tide for our sakes, showed us how to live and what sometimes happens when we do. And did this because it was the “good pleasure” of our Father — yours and mine.

So do we really have to sell everything we own, liquidate all of our assets, and give away all of our property? That is certainly a literal reading of this text, or this bit of text. But we can think of it as a rhetorical flourish that highlights Jesus’ major point, the one that he has been making again and again: this world, our *kosmos*, with its worries, stresses, pains and insecurities is a passing thing. It will not last. The Kingdom is eternal, and it is in the Kingdom that we need to make our home, not so much by giving away all of our possessions, but by living as if we could, as if they do not matter because they do not. What does matter is

the quality of our relationships, the nature of our compassion and our yearning for the Kingdom.

St Augustine once said of this yearning in a famous prayer that “our hearts are restless and will not find their rest until they rest in you”. It is not the implacable judgement of an angry God that we long for but the eternal banquet of heaven, the gracious court of the Lord of Eternity. Jesus said that it is ours for the taking. For that is our Father’s “good pleasure”.

The Lord be with you.