

Sunday 9th February

Isaiah 58:1-12

Matthew 5:13-20

Many people find the Old Testament to be a confusing book and so don't read it, or only read the bits they can immediately understand. So many different stories and types of writing.

History books – the stories of the judges and kings for example. Tales of battles and conquests; of the formation of a nation, of its sad history from strength under David and Solomon to exile and fragmentation.

poetry books – the psalms which were the worship songs of the people; many written by David – songs for all kinds of times – rejoicing, praise, thanks, lament - the highs and lows of individual and national life. All is here

wisdom literature – such as proverbs or the book of Job; giving wise words on how to live, how to make decisions and how to follow God. Or telling stories which illustrate the folly and fickleness of humans. People trying to gain knowledge, to put themselves in the positions of God rather than those who honour and respect God

prophecies – like those of Isaiah for example - which contain messages from God for particular situations and times as well as predictions, foretelling the near or far future. Courageous words spoken by brave individuals standing up to kings and rulers, religious leaders and priests. Bringing the truth of God into situations where it was found wanting.

But the overarching purpose of the OT is to tell the story of the people of Israel and their relationship with God.

A story with high points and low points. A story of success and failure; a story of the love of God and the folly of people; the providence of God and the disobedience of his people.

A story of the Israelite nation being chosen by God, but a story of them totally missing the point of what being chosen meant and was all about. A story which shows that they believed that they had been chosen by God because they were special, because of something they had done or

because of something they were - , whereas the truth is they were chosen because God wanted them to be a witness, a light if you like to the rest of the world.

A story of the Israelites believing that the law was given to prove how good they could be, rather than to be a guide as to how they should live in order to show the love of God to others.

And we see this in today's OT reading – a section from Isaiah that seems to be repeated so often in other verses from other prophets. Here the prophet Isaiah says – you fast, you worship, you obey the letter of the law, but you don't seem to notice the effect of your behaviour. Your workers are being exploited; there is fighting and disputes, there is injustice, greed and selfishness **and you are to blame**

You're so busy trying to prove how good you are, how special you are but you totally misunderstand that I want you to be lights. I want you to show me to others, to show them how to live. And the amazing thing is that if you did this, if you lived as the lights I want and desire you to be, you would find the blessing that you crave. It won't come by slavishly obeying the law, but it will come by living out the law.

And in the gospel reading from the sermon on the mount Jesus picks up the same theme.

I haven't come to do away with the law, he says , but to fulfil it. What I am about isn't something new, it's actually what the OT is really about. I am here to show you how to live; to show you what you should do in order to demonstrate the love of God to others.

And Jesus says virtually the same things that Isaiah says. You are lights, you are salt. What you do and who you are makes a difference to people and to situations. You are called to show others how to live; to demonstrate the love of God; to shed light on the world, to bring flavour to the world, to preserve the truth.

And it's a sad fact that many Christians fall into the same trap as the Israelites. Their faith is personal. It's all about their own spirituality, their own prayer life; their own worship. What works for them; what brings them as individuals into the presence of God. Countless books have been written, sermons have been preached, study groups have been

attended all about improving our prayer life, deepening our worship and enriching our spirituality as if this is what God wants from us.

But here Jesus makes it clear that the depth of our relationship with God is evidenced by what we are and what we do in the world rather than how pious we are, how many prayers we pray and how many services we attend.

So how can we be light and salt? What does he mean by this?

We have recently returned from skiing in Switzerland, as you know.

We might tend to think of the wonders of skiing under a blue sky in the sunshine, with great snow and even better visibility. We can see exactly where we are going and where we need to go.

Not on this holiday, but a few years ago we did some night-time skiing which was a first for us. Skiing by head torch light. About 40 of us skiing down the mountain, each with a light. Skiing in a line. Following the tracks of the person in front. And the interesting thing was that it wasn't my light that helped me to see where I was going, but the light of the skier in front. It was her light that showed me the way. I can only hope that my light was useful for the person behind.

And then there's the kinds of day on the slopes when the clouds descend, and it's like trying to ski through a thick pea-soup kind of fog. With very limited visibility. Skiing in these conditions is tough. You can't see the state of the terrain. You can't see where the piste rises and falls. The safest way was to follow the person in front. To watch them carefully. To ski in their tracks. To follow their path – follow their light if you like.

And this is the kind of thing Jesus is getting at. Live in such a way as helps others to see God, to appreciate his love, to know of what he has done,

Live in such a way as shines the light of God's truth in to situations, as brings the preservation and flavoursome properties of salt to situations; as makes a difference because of what we do or say or think or who we are. It's not always about doing - maybe sometimes we just have to be. Salt preserves, remember, just by being salt. Salt gives flavour – just by

being salt.

And of course our model in this, the one who is setting the pace and guiding us down the hill if you like is Jesus himself. To see how we live, we look to him. The perfect example of human life. We follow his example in both the way we live and the way we show others how to live and how to know God. His example of self giving, putting others first, looking out for those on the margins, standing up for truth and God's love and purpose.

And in times like these time in which we live - when around the world movements are rising up which seem to favour treatment of some people over others. When concerns that are raised over refugees, foreigners and those who are 'different'. When there is a tendency to divide people and countries into 'them'; and 'us'. It's in times like these when the voice of Jesus, the light of Jesus , the salt of Jesus is most needed.

What Jesus is saying is that we need to commit ourselves to the needs and concerns of God most often manifested in the lives of the weak and powerless. Our own relationship with him is important - of course it is - but the truth is that this will grow and develop more if we live it out rather than simply try to grow it alone.

His call to us is like the call of Isaiah to the Israelites. To live for others rather than just for ourselves. Let's try to ensure we not only hear the message, but actually model our lives on it and do something! Ski with the knowledge that others are following us down the slope - that we are not alone on the piste.

Be that salt and shine that light.