

Share your bread with the hungry...
Sermon on Isaiah 58v2ff

Sisters and brothers, the United Methodist Church invites people world wide to meditate on peace and justice today, to choose prayers, songs and texts to help us remember that God wants this world to be a good place where everybody can live life in fullness. One of my favourite texts on this theme comes from Isaiah 58.

It is God who is speaking in the most significant parts of the text:

And God says: ...this is what I choose...

to loose the bonds of injustice,

to undo the thongs of the yoke,

to let the oppressed go free,

and to break every yoke...

to share your bread with the hungry,

and bring the homeless poor into your house;

when you see the naked, to cover them,

and not to hide yourself from your own kin!

I don't think I really have to explain that, do I?

The resemblance to Jesus' words: "I was hungry and you gave me food,

I was thirsty...

I was a stranger...

I was naked and you gave me clothing;

I was in prison and you visited me..." strikes me.

To sum it up: I was in need – and you were there for me.

That rings a bell, doesn't it?

And besides we all know bonds of injustice.

We know yokes of different kinds.

We know of oppression and hunger and homelessness. And if it is not an experience we have had ourselves, we know people who have, and people who told us about it.

In those few verses which I just quoted, we are asked not to hide from the lives of those who might need us for support or assistance. Today this text speaks to us more straight forwardly maybe than many other biblical passages.

But who did it refer to, when it was first said or written down?

A group of Jews had just returned home to Israel from their exile in Babylon.

They had endured the bitter experience of deportation, captivity and oppression. And the only song that still came to their lips was the sad witness of the suffering of God's people in the strange and hostile land:

"By the rivers of Babylon," they sang, "there we sat down, and there we wept, when we remembered Zion..."

Not all of them came back.

Many had died.

Others had abandoned their faith and adjusted to the Babylonian faith and life and stayed there.

Those who came back found Jerusalem almost destroyed and the temple a ruin. The most essential things for everyday life had to be rebuilt first!

The visions of freedom, the high expectations of their return to their home country clashed painfully with the reality of the exploited and defeated country.

The people were right when they asked whether the words of the prophets that had helped to keep them going for so long, were maybe just empty words.

Where were peace and justice?

Where was the end of all violence?

Had they possibly only exchanged one unbearable situation for another?

...having left the Babylonian soldiers behind –

and now having to face an unwelcoming, unfair and unjust system in what once was their beloved home?

However much the majority in Israel had to suffer, there had always been a small but powerful group that still made a good living.

They were rich, and they were mean.

They had everything under control, but didn't care for the social needs of the city at all.

The small but well-off Jewish upper class just did what was good and profitable for them and were by no means willing to restructure and share their wealth ...

It was them, God spoke to in the first place!

They had found some substitute temple and worshipped at worship services which excluded all who were not among "the powerful and beautiful".

The poor couldn't afford to go to church, they had to work...

and even if they had been able to, they wouldn't have been allowed in anyway...

The difference between this rich minority and those who'd come back after years and years of suffering and mourning was vast.

On their return they had nothing in their hands, and just the clothes they were wearing.

And there was no help for them; no support, no social system that would provide...

The injustice they experienced now that they had come home, was a scandal.

And it was hard to bear after all they had already gone through.

It was the rich and fortunate Israelites who had asked their God in the first part of our passage (which we haven't read), whether he did actually see them and their religious efforts.

"Why do we fast, but you do not see?

Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?"

And they got the answer immediately:

"Look", God responded, "you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers...", who were actually cheap to get, since the social situation was at its worst, and more people were unemployed than one would imagine.

"You fast", God added "only to quarrel and fight..."

What a shame, really?!

"Such fasting", God continued, "will not make your voice be heard on high..."

Do you want to know, do you really want to know what sort of fast, what behaviour, what practises are acceptable to me?"

And whether they wanted to know or not, God then spoke through Isaiah, the prophet, the most demanding words of feeding the hungry, loosing the bonds, breaking the yokes, and once and for all doing the justice that he requires.

God speaks to the rich.

He shows them their duty to support the poor and protect the needy.

He is not in the least balanced.

He stands on the side of the weak and clearly blames the rich.

God dislikes the religious practises of the upper class.

He doesn't want them to pray and fast, but to share!

Share with all those who are in need;

share with the hungry;

share with the homeless;

and share with those who don't even have anything to wear.

From a theological point of view, the climax of God standing on the side of the poor finds its strongest expression in Jesus.

God becomes human in a tiny baby, the child of poor peasants being born in poverty, threatened by homelessness, and haunted by cruel dictatorship.

Jesus was consistently on the side of the needy.

He understood himself a successor of Isaiah.

He was the fulfiller of people's visions and the prophets' promises...

"...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me," he told the people who followed him, and helped them to understand that it is no other than God, whom they will always meet in the hungry, the thirsty, the strangers and the needy.

The prophets – including Jesus – are unerring and incorruptible guardians of God's will for humanity and justice!

They were at all times God's reminder of goodness and grace in a world of oppression, injustice and fear.

Isaiah knew the people he spoke to well.

He knew of their fears and doubts, their small-heartedness, their greed – and also their deep longing for life and wealth.

He didn't approach them with accusations, threats or appeals.

He simply introduced to them a different kind of living and thinking,

If they only started to change their minds...

Isaiah offered them joy of life and a tremendous feeling of relief,

as soon as they'd let go of their greed and selfishness, and start caring for others.

"Then your light shall break forth like the dawn; and your healing shall spring up quickly; ...you will call, and the Lord will answer..."

If you start sharing and working for justice, “you shall be like a watered garden..., like a spring of water, whose waters never fail!”

What a promise!

What a perspective... that might win people over?!

Sentences that open a future beyond all they would have thought of:
life in all its fullness for all of them.

God does not say:

If you all carry on like this, your country will be stuck in darkness forever...

God tells the people: if you remove the yoke, then your light shall rise in the darkness...

He doesn't say: you are a sick, ill natured and lost nation,

but tells them: your healing shall spring up, and your bones will be made strong.”

“If you offer food to the hungry...”,

your life can become bright and colourful. And God will answer when you call. He will be there, when you cry for help.

Your life in this worn-out country can become again like a watered garden...

full of blossoming and growth.

And generation after generation will speak of you as repairers and restorers.

Thanks to you there will again be houses to live in,

gardens to plant,

streets to walk,

a community to care for... and: a life worth living...

...if you satisfy not only your own needs, but those of others too.

There is a story Jesus told, it shows what can happen to those who accumulate and hold back and keep for themselves...

“You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” Remember the parable?

What are you living for?

What are you accumulating for?

Or, think of the Manna story in the Old Testament...

Those who thought themselves ever so clever by collecting more than the others did, and in fact more than they needed, only found worms and rotteness the next day.

Nothing to enjoy.

Nothing to live on, but a lesson to learn...

an invitation to trust in the blessings of sharing...

to trust in the flow of giving and taking...

to trust in the community and the care of your fellow human beings.

Would we trust each other, if we were the Israelites in the desert?

Would we believe that there will be enough for all of us?

That those who'd collected more, would of course share with those who had gathered less?

Would we be able to wake up from the deathly oppression of accumulating and holding onto, and discover the relief of letting go?
 Would we be able to – eventually – join the vivid dance of giving and taking?
 Of great-heartedness and thankfulness?
 Would we manage to stop worrying, and care less for ourselves and more for others?

The biblical stories – the one of the bread from heaven, the one Jesus told, and of course the account on Isaiah's time after the exile in Babylon, don't want to put pressure on people.

They just want to offer a totally different way of thinking, living and caring.
 They invite us to leave the restriction of fear, defensiveness and selfishness, and enter into the freedom of receiving with open hands, and investing with warm hearts.
 They want us to discover the ability to live here and now, appreciate each single moment, make the most of it, rather than worrying all the time.

Even if we succeed in changing our attitude towards what we possess, who we are and what we can give away, this earth won't immediately turn into paradise.
 We do not leave reality behind by changing our point of view; we just see with different eyes:

see more clearly the hungry,
 the homeless,
 the disadvantaged,
 the neglected and deprived.

And: we can probably see what riches we've been given by what we have and who we are?!

We might then understand what opportunities we have to change the lives of so many... what resources there are to help and improve, to develop and support.

“Share your bread with the hungry” is a call to change our hearts and minds.
 It is an invitation to new life in the light of God that will break forth like the dawn: light after the hours of the night.

Then our lives will be like a watered garden:

we still have to work in it,
 work the soil,
 care for plants,
 enhance the growth.

We still have to dig and sow and water – just to stay in that image -,
 but we'd live by the promise
 that the water we all always need to live will never fail,
 that the ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
 that we shall raise the foundations of many generations;
 and that it is us who will be called the repairers and restorers of life! ...those who care and love and bring forth, those who feed and nourish and develop...

If you remove the yoke from among you,
 the pointing of the finger,

the speaking of evil;
if you offer your food to the hungry,
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted...

These words speak strongly for themselves.

Just look around.

See the faces of family and friends and others. And see God's face in those you are looking at.

Read the newspaper. Watch the news.

Care for the people near and far...

Give what you can give. Don't be too shy, too self-conscious to speak out loud for those who are voiceless.

Don't think you are too small, too unimportant, too powerless...

don't think that the little you can give or say, won't do...

Look at us all together, with all we have.

Let us join hands and work together to make the earth a place where nobody is without justice and peace.

Let us start here and now.

Amen.