

**Isaiah 58: 6-12**  
**Harvest Sermon 2017**

**Is not this the fast that 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?  
Is it not 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?  
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing shall spring up quickly;  
your vindicator shall go before you,  
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.  
Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;  
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.  
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,  
then your light shall rise in the darkness  
and your gloom be like the noonday.  
The LORD will guide you continually,  
and satisfy your needs in parched places,  
and make your bones strong;  
and you shall be like a watered garden,  
like a spring of water,  
whose waters never fail.  
Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;  
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;  
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,  
the restorer of streets to live in.**

Sisters and brothers, it is Harvest Festival today. One of the most joyful and colourful events in the life of our church. Everything is richly decorated. We give thanks for the produce of working people everywhere. And we give thanks to God, who we believe, blesses the work of our human hands. Harvest is a time of happiness.

In the German lectionary the Isaiah text we've just heard is the sermon text for the harvest services this year. So why not choose it for Peace Church too, I thought. Some of its images stand in stark contrast to the happiness of this day.

We come across destruction, hunger, poverty and slavery. All experiences of the people of Israel after the end of the Babylonian exile.

They had come back to their home country, Israel, and after the first enthusiasm of being home again, hopelessness and despair took over. The reality they faced had nothing to do with the order they believed God had given his people. They felt abandoned by God, totally exposed and alone...

Some of them called to God, some prayed and meditated, others fasted. They tried to get closer to God again. But soon they were fed up and complained that all their efforts were in vain.

And this is the point when Isaiah begins to speak.

He says: "You are fasting, yes, but you are not changing in thought and mind. You are fasting on the one hand, but leading a godless and disgraceful life on the other hand. What shall God do with such fasting? Such empty and false efforts," Isaiah asks and surprises the people with our sermon text.

If you want to get closer to God, this is what you should do...

**...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.  
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing shall spring up quickly; (...)  
Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;  
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.**

I love this passage!

The words and expressions are warm, friendly and inviting. It is a guideline then and now for all those who ask how to live a life which is close to God. It is a loving response to all who seek a life which pleases God.

And those of us who grew up in the Christian church have these verses almost as a childhood memory. ...together with the words of Jesus which are so similar to the Isaiah passage.

Do you remember them?

**"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, I was naked and you gave me clothing..."** and so on.

Jesus explains that when we attend to those in need, we attend to him.

Maybe some of the words in the Isaiah text as oppression, hunger and homelessness are not what we expect on Harvest Festival Sunday. But: Harvest Festival is not only a feast for those who work in fields and have gardens with fruit and vegetables. Harvest Festival is "celebrating the whole of human life" – all we have and need to be able to exist. Harvest Festival is about our work, our income, our daily lives, our colleagues and friends, our families. It is about the support we

need, the help we give, the bread we share, the love we offer, the trust we can put in others. Our whole life is regarded as a reason for joy and thanksgiving.

Harvest Festival reminds us that most of what we have for life is given to us. And we can enjoy it and rejoice over it as much as we like. We thank God for his love and care. And in that thankfulness we include our daily bread as much as thanks for the love we experience. Harvest and thanksgiving invite us to express our thanks for all the good things we are given.

That is one side. And the other side is that every gift received is also a call to act: what makes us rich and fills our lives with abundance and joy is also something that wants to be used for others too. Creating equal and fair life conditions for all people is a task God gives us. Our time, our money, our talents are to be used to fill and improve the life of others.

The Bible text though does not say: “Give all your bread to the hungry...” It says: “Share what you have...” meaning I have my share and give to others too, I have a home and make sure others have one too, I have clothes and take care of others so they are dressed beautifully and warm too, I am free and invest my time and talents so that others can live in freedom too.

Isaiah says: “Give part of what you have to those in need, break your bread with others and understand that what you are given is not for you alone. If God gives you abundantly, pass it on to others. If God loves you, you love others too.

Sounds so easy.

But if we are honest: how often do we forget?

Aren't there times when we don't share, don't care, don't pay attention to those in need?

...the neighbour who finds it hard to feed her many hungry mouths – especially towards the end of the month... the migrant dad who finds it hard to support his school children with their homework... the friend who lost his job... the single mother looking desperately for an apartment... the refugee who is without a language course... the young woman who needs a bicycle in order to get to her work place... and the asylum seeker without the possibility of eating regularly and healthily. Do we see them?

We cannot help everybody. But we can keep our eyes and ears open and help where we can.

It is important that texts like our Bible reading today exist! ...and, of course, that we read it, so that we can be invited to live the way God wants us to live.

Every human being in need, every person suffering is a son or a daughter of God, - just as we are. They all are family... made of the same stuff... part of God's beautiful creation. And every relationship you may be seeking with God, is also relating you to the members of God's family, world wide...

There cannot be light in your life as long as it is dark for others. There cannot be healing for a few, as long as others are sick and sad.

**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,  
then your light shall rise in the darkness  
and your gloom be like the noonday.  
The LORD will guide you continually,  
and satisfy your needs in parched places,  
and make your bones strong;...**

Promises are given to us, job descriptions if you like... And all we are invited to live and do comes to us in adorably beautiful poetry. We are offered a life full of human challenges and adventures and God is there with us.

We don't always get what we deserve.

We always get more from God than we deserve...

God gives freely and abundantly, in surprising and overwhelming ways...

We cannot win God over by good deeds. God does not need that. God is always there for us with the fullness of life, and he invites us, and sometimes begs us, to pass on that fullness.

**...you shall raise up...**

**you shall be called the repairer...**

**the restorer ...**

Let God touch you today with the beauty of Isaiah's text. Let these powerful words fill you with hope for justice and peace in the world, and let them be your guideline for all you do. Always.

Amen.