

Isaiah 58:1-12

58 Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. ²Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God.

³“Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. ⁴Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. ⁵Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? ⁶Is 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? ⁷Is 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?

⁸Then 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. ⁹Then 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, ¹⁰if 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. ¹¹The 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. ¹²Your 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.

As we are now in the second week of Lent this passage reminds us of fasting. Have you given up any items of food for Lent? How are you doing?

This part of the Book of Isaiah deals with the time after the people return to Jerusalem from their time in exile. The city is not what it was before they left, it was now in ruins; the years of exile had not served the city well and there was much that needed rebuilding.

God wanted his people to know that their religious practices would only please God if they are manifest in the wider life of the people. The appeal is to fast not simply from food, but from greed, quarrelling, oppression and the like. God desires, and expects, his people to share bread with the hungry, clothe the naked and treat people with fairness. God expressed his commitment to help his people rebuild the city if they lived that way.

As we are looking as a country and as a world to find our way out of Lockdown (exile) and back into living in our communities again, much of that which was is no more. Many businesses have failed or at least are struggling due to the pandemic. Is there a message in this passage for the world today?

If as a community, country, world we care for all will there be the rebuilding of economies not so much that the rich shall be even more comfortable but that all shall be able to live a better life? If we fast from greed, oppression and quarrelling will the world be blessed by God?

If God's Church lives this way what will the difference be? ¹⁰if 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.”