

Utterly Useless!

Isaiah 58¹⁻⁹; Psalm 112; 1 Corinthians 2¹⁻¹²; Matthew 5¹³⁻²⁰

*Day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness.
[Isaiah 58²]*

However you approach the task of writing a sermon - looking to the text to shape what is said or using a phrase to justify an idea that is to be explored - I suppose that there are only a limited number of sermons:

- ✠ The Evangelical Sermon: the call to repent and to follow Jesus as disciples - the beginning of faith
- ✠ The 'Nice' Sermon: an affirmation that God loves you and looks after you - that your faith is sustained
- ✠ The Hopeful Sermon: a reminder that this life is not all there is - the hope of resurrection proclaimed and a reminder that whatever we struggle with will pass
- ✠ The Beating-Up sermon: a reminder that we aren't doing what we should, or not doing it well enough - the problem with these is that you often crawl away defeated rather than inspired to do better

The readings for today lean towards the latter and fully justify any congregation becoming a spiritual punch-bag for a preacher!

- ✠ Does your righteousness **exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees?** Christianity isn't a spiritual 'Get Out Of Jail' card that means we can do what we like and ask God to bless the things he likes and forgive the things he doesn't (which is how most of live in practice). The Scribes and Pharisees may be hate figures in the Gospels because of their pedantic approach to the law (explained in the Midrash), but Jesus makes clear that the standard for Christians is higher than that legalism - it is to understand the spirit behind the law and not the letter of the law.

If **salt has lost its taste** or a light has gone out, it can no longer be called salt or light: Christians that aren't consistently Christian are useless.

- ✠ Then Paul calls us to recognise that our faith doesn't make sense but makes a difference! **My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom but on the power of God.**

I confess that I like a faith that makes sense and am challenged to clearly identify where God has acted with power in a clearly defined act that shows his power in a clear way. Then I have to beat myself up for my utter uselessness: I cannot breathe without it being an act of God's power, much less forgive what I do and am! It is that awe that is there in every sunrise or every wave or every mountain (or whatever it is that meets you emotionally) that motivates us to experience the power of God and respond in lives that honour him.

- ✠ Sarah addresses the uselessness of undisguised hypocrisy amongst the people of faith - those who **practice righteousness**, who seem to **delight to draw near to God** and those who appear to **call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord.**

How easily we can all do that - of appearing to engage with God and with worship, while all the time our thoughts are elsewhere and our attention distracted. That is why Isaiah makes the point that the outwardly religious acts are utterly useless unless they change who we are and what we do. How many can we tick off from our actions in the last week? **To loose the bonds of injustice; to let the oppressed go free; share your bread with the hungry; bring the homeless poor into your house; see the naked and cover them; not hide yourself from your own kin?**

Is all of this worth it? Can such selflessness and altruism (and just the bother of it all) be justified? Isaiah seems to think so as he goes on to say: **then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am!**

There is, in reality, only one type of sermon: the one that calls people of faith to be what God calls us to be and to be transformed by the power of his spirit so that we make a real difference and a positive contribution to the world. A sermon that doesn't do that is utterly useless. I will leave you to draw your conclusion about a Christian that chooses not to: I'll give you a clue - snap!