

**SERMON PEACHED AT STMATTHEW'S KENSINGTON ON SUNDAY AUGUST 7, 2022 BY
THE REV'D STUART LANGSHAW (LOCUM WHILE TIM HARRIS IS AT LAMBETH)
CONFERENCE**

DATE: Sunday August 7 and Wednesday August 10

CHURCH: St Matthew's Kensington

SERMON SERIES: The Lectionary

BIBLE PASSAGE: Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

SERMON TOPIC: Prophets and their messages

Dinner parties can be very good experiences. When people converse easily over a range of topics, when “other” points of view are put and are listened to politely, when the “vibe” is positive, and the ambience is good, such dinners are a joy. But you must choose your invited guests carefully. One whole group of people from whom it would be difficult to invite as dinner guests would be the old prophets of Israel from the Old Testament. Most of them seem to have got out of bed on the wrong side. They were an irascible, argumentative bunch of chaps ... no women among them, you’ll notice. They criticised just about everyone and everything. They had little to say that was uplifting and comforting ... but note ... not *nothing* to say that was comforting, but *little* to say that was such.

Our readings at church in the past month or so have been from the prophet Hosea, and on the whole, he has been pretty miserable. Our reading this morning is from Isaiah, and he too has negative thing to say. But in all fairness to them, the prophets were aware of the standards that God had set, and were hyper-aware that the people of God had wandered far away from those standards. They had turned their back on the covenant that God had made with them. The people needed correction, and they needed to be told just where it was in their lives that they had gone away from what God had set down for them.

Let’s remind ourselves about what Isaiah spoke about in the first chapter of that book of prophecy that bears his name. We read that chapter just few minutes ago. Isaiah reported that God was fed up with religious observance that had no spin-off into daily living. If religious ceremony and worship was simply outward show, and there was no inward devotion that observed the deeper ethical and moral implications of faith, then all the religious ceremony was useless. Let’s be careful to be clear, however. Isaiah was not condemning religious ceremony as such ... he was condemning religious ceremony that did not lead its observers into deeds and words and attitudes that stood up for the poor and for the people who had no influence.

So we could wrongly take verses 11- 14 as saying that God is against religious ceremony, is against attendance at worship, is against offerings and sacrifices, is against holy days and festivals. But that’s not what the context says. This is why, when we read the Bible, it’s important to read around and after and before verses of Scripture so that we get the context and get the correct message. Read again these verses – they’re on the screen.

[“What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? Says the Lord. I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of he-goats. ... Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me ... I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me...”]

The reason for God’s displeasure and for Isaiah’s trenchant criticism is found in verse 15 – “your hands are full of blood.” In verse 16. “You are doing evil.” Verse 17 – “Correct oppression; defend the fatherless; plead for the widow.” “Inside the temple, worship with all your heart. Even more importantly, inside your heart, worship with all your faculties. Outside the temple, live morally, live compassionately, live with the needs of others always before you, and do what you can to assist them.”

Much later in history, when James wrote his epistle, he said in 1:27, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” “Amen,” thundered Isaiah. And Jesus had said in the Sermon on the Mount, “If you are offering your gift at the altar and there ... there at the altar in the very act of worship ... you

remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.” (Matthew 5:23-24). Worship is good, but being in a right relationship with someone you have wronged needs to be put right before that act of worship is significant to you. “Amen” thunders Isaiah again. “Yes indeedy,” says St James.

But the prophets also had positive and good things to say. In today’s reading Isaiah gives us one of the warmest, strongest verses of our scriptures – “Wash yourselves - make yourselves clean” (and there’s a bit in the Welcome Sheet about washing in Bible times). “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.” (Isaiah 1:18) Sin and rebellion and departure from God has to be recognised for what it is - but God always holds out hope for his people. Hosea shows God’s agony about the rebellious people of Judah and Israel and his love for them, though they were rebellious. “How can I give you up, O Ephraim! How can I hand you over, O Israel!” (Hosea 11:8) Hosea had already reported God’s loving response to the unfaithful people – “I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness, and in justice, and in steadfast love, in mercy and in faithfulness.” (Hosea 2:19-20).

I know that here at St Matthew’s you are very familiar with the word and the concept of Shalom. It is one of the great ideas of the Old Testament, and of the whole Bible. But I would like to add another word to your theological lexicon. That word and concept is **Hesed**. Its translation is “loving kindness.” And it was used by Hosea in that passage I just quoted from chapter 2. “I will betroth you to me in loving kindness.” **Hesed** is found most frequently in the Psalms, but also comes in Hosea and in Jeremiah 31:3, “I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my **hesed** – my loving kindness – to you.”

Hesed is most often used to describe the character of God. Many places in Scripture speak of the lovingkindness of the Lord. “I the Lord show steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.” (Exodus 20:6). Lovingkindness is part of who God is; He is a God of justice who, however, delights in showing lovingkindness (Micah 7:18), and we praise God for this part of his character (Psalm 138:2.).

Hesed / lovingkindness, is most often used to describe God’s heart toward those who are His own. Lovingkindness is God’s kindness and steadfast love for His children, especially evident in his meeting our needs. In Scripture, God shows His lovingkindness in saving His children from their enemies and delivering them from their troubles (Exodus 15:13; Jeremiah 31:3; Ezra 7:28; Psalm 6:4; 33:18; 119:149). His lovingkindness comforts us (Psalm 119:76), redeems us from sin (Numbers 14:19; Psalm 25:7; 51:1), and assures us of His promises (Deuteronomy 7:9; Nehemiah 1:5; 2 Samuel 7:15; Psalm 18:50).

God’s lovingkindness is abundant (Numbers 14:18), great in extent (Psalm 33:5; 145:8), everlasting (Jeremiah 33:11; Psalm 100:5), and full of goodness (Psalm 69:17). God’s lovingkindness, His steadfast, loving actions on our behalf, knows no bounds: “Your lovingkindness is great to the heavens, and your truth to the clouds” (Psalm 57:10, NASB).

It is this part of God’s character that causes God to hang in there, and to continue hanging in there, with people who rebel against him, forsake his ways, turn their worship into mere show without any devotion.

The New Testament fulfils and expands this concept of God’s loving kindness to us. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” That’s the breadth and depth of God’s loving-kindness, **hesed**, shown in Jesus. **Hesed** of the Old Testament becomes the **agape** of the New Testament. What we saw in Isaiah 1:18, is fulfilled in John 3:16. The Old Testament and the New Testament both describe God’s character as being love. 1 John 4:16 tells us that God is love, and those who abide in God abide in love...”

And for many of us here this morning, this has been our experience. At some stage in our lives we have experienced the great love of God that is revealed in the Son, and we have voluntarily put our lives into the loving and caring reign of Christ, because we have experienced the **hesed** of God, the loving-kindness of

God. And here in this service of Holy Communion, as we receive the bread and wine-or-juice of Communion, we could make that simple act today our own expression of gratitude for God's loving kindness shown to us in Jesus' death and resurrection, and our determination to do all we can to live in that love and to show it to others.