

In AD 70, at a time of deepening crisis in the city of Jerusalem, Rabbi Hanina, then Deputy High Priest in the Temple, said ‘Pray for the welfare of the government, for were it not that the people stood in fear of it, they would swallow one another alive.’ Rabbi Hanina served during the last days of the Second Temple, prior to its final destruction by the Romans in the year 70 AD. During that period the historian Josephus tells us of the people of Jerusalem locked in bitter internal conflict.

Ever since that day, the 9th day of the Jewish month of Av, the Jews have observed Tish Av as a solemn day of mourning, a perpetual reminder of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. A reminder also of the whole breakdown of their society, that led to that catastrophic event in their history. On the Sabbath closest to that day they read the passage that we have read this morning as our Old Testament Lesson, the first chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. This passage has its own roots in a previous time of crisis that culminated in the destruction of the First Temple and with it the Exile into Babylon.

In this passage, Isaiah was proclaiming God’s impending judgement on Jerusalem that was the inevitable consequence of the way the people of the day had played fast and loose with God’s Covenant first made at Sinai. God had called his people to a different kind of nationhood, to live as a sign to the nations – but they had become like the other nations where the rich lived at the expense of the poor, where the powerful trampled on the rights of the weak and the marginalised.

Life and worship cannot be seen as existing in isolation from each other. What you believe and what you do; your worship and your way of life, your attitudes to the poor and the marginalised cannot be separated. This had been a theme running through the prophets of the period.

So Isaiah declares to the people of Jerusalem:

remove the evil of your doings
from before my eyes;
cease to do evil,
¹⁷learn to do good;
seek justice,
rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan,
plead for the widow.

But even as judgement is announced, the possibility of reprieve, of redemption is offered as the prophet continues:

¹⁸Come now, let us argue it out,
says the LORD:
though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be like snow;
though they are red like crimson,
they shall become like wool.

This juxtaposition of judgment and an offering of redemption emphasizes for me a very important truth about the whole biblical story. That story, right from the Fall right through to the death of Jesus on the Cross, contains within it two strands – the is the story of judgement and running alongside it the story of salvation. These are not mutually exclusive – they are not even contrasting – they are part and parcel of the same story. Those of you brought up on the old Prayer Book, will remember the opening words of the Prayer of Absolution at Morning and Evening Prayer, which picks up words from the Prophet Eaekeiel:

Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who desireth not the death of a sinner, but rather that he may turn from his wickedness, and live; *Absolution in Morning Prayer (order 1)*

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It is at this point I would want to turn to our Gospel reading, the parable of the faithful servants. It is a story not only of faithful servants, ready at anytime to greet their master on his arrival – it is also the story of a master who serves

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This brings me to a point we have reflected on on many occasions; Our God is a God of new beginnings, of second chances. At no stage are we so far from God that God does not invite us back.

I spoke at the outset of the crisis that was facing Jerusalem in AD 70 prior to its destruction by the Romans, the crisis that faced Jerusalem during the time of Isaiah that culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Exile in Babylon.

Crises come in many different forms. We can all recall the crisis that faced our country at the time of the economic crash. We may experience crises in our won lives for many different reasons – loss of employment, breakup of a relationship, serious illness. Such crises, whether personal or communal, challenge our own self confidence, our own self understanding – who we are, what is important – what in the words of the Gospel is our ultimate treasure.

This season of Trinity, this period of reflection following on from the great Festivals of Christmas, Easter and Pentecost, as we reflect on the life and teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus, we are invited to reflect on who we are as followers of Christ in the world of today. Sometimes we will get it right and at other times we will get it horribly wrong but the God of new beginnings, the God who, in the words of the Collect for today, ‘declare(s) (his) almighty power most chiefly in showing mercy and pity:’ meets us in the person of his Son and leads us gently on. And so we continue to pray in the words of the Collect

Mercifully grant to us such a measure of your grace,
that we, running the way of your commandments,
may receive your gracious promises,
and be made partakers of your heavenly treasure;

I close with the Absolution at Morning and Evening Prayer from the old Service of Morning Prayer:

Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who desireth not the death of a sinner, but rather that he may turn from his wickedness, and live; and hath given power, and commandment, to his Ministers, to declare and pronounce to his people, being penitent, the Absolution and Remission of their sins: He pardoneth and absolveth all them that truly repent, and unfeignedly believe his holy Gospel. Wherefore let us beseech him to grant us true repentance, and his Holy Spirit, that those things may please him which we do at this present; and that the rest of our life hereafter may be pure and holy; so that at the last we may come to his eternal joy; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.