

3 before Lent sermon by Andrew 9 Feb 2020

If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil... your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.

Years ago a parishioner of mine told me the saying that whenever you point the finger at someone, three fingers point back at you. That was a realisation that had changed his life. He'd been shot down over Germany during the Second World War and he was the only member of his bomber crew to survive. Which made him wonder what God might have in mind for him. His life had been saved, but for what? He was taken captive and held in the same prisoner of war camp that featured in the film, "The Great Escape", and when most the escapees were caught and shot, again he found himself wondering: Why am I still here? When it could so easily have been him what was his survival going to be about?

That's where the pointing finger came in. He said to me: I realised, Andrew, I could either spend the rest of my life pointing the finger of judgement, blaming Germans, hating them, or I could be honest about myself, my own need for forgiveness (the three fingers that point back at me) and use my life to spread peace. Which is what he did. He became involved in a worldwide movement for peace for which he and his wife worked in Washington DC, running a home where young people of every race, colour and creed could meet and learn from each other.

He turned into a warrior for peace, and a great man of prayer. He was one of those people who, if he told you he would pray for you, you knew you would be prayed for. He was a light-bearer, a city on a hill.

For Isaiah this ought to be "back to basics" stuff for the people of God. They're doing all the right things in the Temple, making their offerings, saying their prayers – but they can't understand why it all just seems to be hitting some kind of glass ceiling and God seems deaf to their prayers.

But there's something wrong. They've put religion into some hermetically sealed compartment of their lives where it doesn't affect anything else, doesn't affect how they act, spend their money, treat people around them. The needy just seem to be invisible to them – out of sight, out of mind. But that's something the Jewish people should have known they could never get away with. Who are we?, they'd ask themselves every Passover. We're redeemed slaves, rescued out of Egypt. The Jubilee laws of Deuteronomy were meant to enshrine that memory as a way of living and treating people.

The Jubilee laws required that you didn't harvest the edges of your fields – that was to be left for the poor, the widow, the alien passing through. Every seven years debts were to be cancelled, slaves set free, so that the whole society could almost re-set itself and be, among all the other kingdoms around them, God's special kingdom and if you want to see this at work the beautiful book of Ruth is set against just this background. Ruth and her mother-in-law are gleaning the edges of the fields left specially for them.

And it's to all of this that Isaiah recalls the people: loose the bonds of injustice, let the oppressed go free, undo the thongs of the yoke, share your bread with the hungry and shelter the homeless poor.

This is what makes God's people a city set on a hill, a light for all to see. What a challenge then to the Church to hear the same prophetic words if we ever dare to think that worship is just words read from a book. The Jesus we know asks for far more. He says that the righteousness of the Pharisees isn't wrong – rather, it doesn't go far enough. Which ought to have us running for the exits, because if all that the Pharisees did isn't enough, where does that leave us? But the difference is in the Spirit. Christians believe that the Spirit of Jesus transforms the Christian person – heart, mind, soul, and action. For Paul it's the power of the Spirit that gives him this unshakeable conviction that the seemingly impossible is possible for God: “Eye has not seen nor the human heart conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.”

Again and again we see how great movements for justice begin in the smallest ways: Rosa Parkes refusing to give up her seat on a bus in Alabama to a white man in the days of segregation in the Deep South, beginning with one small gesture a civil rights movement that became unstoppable; or closer to home, one man, Alan Berry, a Baptist pastor in Leith began the Bethany Christian Trust because he was so moved with compassion for Edinburgh's homeless people and Bethany has now helped countless thousands find their way towards a new life, find a way towards the light. Our Food Bank here is one small way in which we're trying to do justice in this place, to offer some light and some hope and some friendship for people who need it.

Just last week, we baptised a little Polish baby, Amelia – or rather Mariusz did and I helped, me not understanding a word and yet I understood the meaning. I lit the baptismal candle from the Paschal Candle for Mariusz and he gave it to the young parents just beginning their new adventure with this gift of a child. “Shine as a light in the world, to the glory of God the Father.” It's a tall order when you're six months old, it's a tall order when you're in your sixties, but this is what Jesus asks us to do: “You are the light of the world...”

Like my prisoner of war friend, we all need to be asking: Lord, what have you saved me for? What's my destiny? What's the part I can play, no matter how tiny to dispel the darkness even a little. What kind of a person am I meant to be? Jesus has no doubt: You are the light of the world, so shine to the glory of God.