

BEING THE CHURCH IN A CHANGING WORLD

The theme chosen by our ordinands raises a number of questions: How should the church function in a rapidly changing world?" How do we retain or reclaim our identity? What is our core business as church in a time like this? Should we remain fixed and fixated by our traditions and practices and simply wait out the changes occurring in every area of life, or should we just go with the flow? Should we, like the shapers of our tradition did, raise the theological questions about life and customs, or should we just park the questions in the search for relevance and growth?

As we wrestle with these fundamental questions it is my view that an examination of our Old Testament lesson offers us much in terms of "Being the church in a changing world."

Any reading of the first two verses of Isaiah 58 reveals a very disturbing picture:

Shout out, do not hold back! Lift your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. Yet 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...

Three images, reflective of our changing world, are

highlighted here:

Rebellion –The Jews in this text had not so much rejected the sacred for the secular as much as they attempted to *marry the sacred with the secular*. This, even though their religion taught them that any such marriage would render the sacred unacceptable to Yahweh.

We live in an age characterized by rebellion, “**being different.**” The barriers of life are being pushed. There is rejection of the status quo, rejection of long accepted norms and values, rejection of tradition and mores and the rejection of ideology. While at the same time there is an embracing of new and different things, technology, triviality and consumerism. We live and worship within a context of a freefall towards rugged individualism, where protest is an acceptable form of resistance, whether justified or not!

What then does it mean to be the church or pastor when *being different* is a major driving force?

Disconnection – There was a gap between faith and practice. They were earnest in their search for, and involvement in, the sacred but the expression of this engagement did not amount to transformed action and relationships.

Can there be any denial that today there is an equally earnest search for spirituality and much involvement in spiritual things? Yet, it is a spirituality, which in its outward expressions seems devoid of the Spirit of God? Sure, it contains and is driven by other spirits but God’s Spirit, which reflects God’s character, is often

missing. We tend to see a gap between ritual and righteousness.

On a wider scale disconnection, "**being out of touch,**" describes so much of what we see and experience in this age. There is disconnection between intent and action, between leaders and people, among nations.

What then does it mean to be the church or pastor when so many and so much seem out of touch?

Inconsistency – if there is rebellion and disconnection, there will always be inconsistency; a kinder word for hypocrisy. We have here, a community of faith whose pursuit of its own agenda, one of having the best of both worlds, rendered its identity both contrary and confused.

Inconsistency, "**being fickle,**" is an apt description of this age. One's identity no longer informs one's agenda. Instead, they are sometimes poles apart. A significant driving force governs many agendas, lives and lifestyles, indeed by the dictum of this age, *what's in it for me?*

What then does it mean to be the church or pastor when so many and so much are fickle?

Common among these post-post modern features of rebellion, being different; of disconnection, being out of touch; and inconsistency, being fickle, is the issue of relationships. Whether you protest or disconnect or you are inconsistent, the common thread is that of relationships. In other words, reality and religion, life

and faith impact relationships.

Isaiah 58 is, among other things, about relationships. It addresses a post-exilic people's relationship both with God and with one another.

Drawing from the lessons of this passage, I wish to offer you a simple message:

If we are to truly be the church in a changing world, if we are to retain our identity and pursue our God-given and God-driven purpose in a world characterized by rebellion, disconnection and inconsistency, we need to positively effect and affect relationships! At all levels!

I wish then to offer three things about 'being the church in a changing world...'

WE ARE CALLED TO BE PROPHETIC NOT PERFECT

A first reading of the passage may suggest that the message is negative both in terms of intent as well as content. The prophet is asked to call a spade a spade in no uncertain terms, *shout out, do not hold back*; declare what God finds untenable. The tone is accusing – you have rebelled against God; the message seems negative – declare the disconnection between faith and practice, and the verdict is damning – there is inconsistency here.

Do we not face the temptation as church to embrace a similar prophetic approach or attitude to life and reality – to accuse, to become negative and to condemn people?

Yet, this passage was not intended to be read

negatively.

It was written to a people who were well-intentioned, good people, people who delighted in God and sought God through their rituals of worship – fasting and Sabbath keeping. The aim of the prophet was not to produce guilt but to hold up a mirror for the examination of their relationship with God and with one another. It was delivered to people who had become disconnected from God and needed to rediscover God by understanding that their relationship with God intersected their relationship with others. They needed to appreciate the narrowness of their vision for community as well as the narrowness of their vision for themselves. So this prophetic word was not intended to condemn. Instead, it was intended to offer the formula for reconnecting and for staying connected.

Our prophetic voice must engage people. It must never stand at a distance and merely shout at or condemn those in or outside the pews. I fear this is far too easy to do. Neither, should our prophetic voice assume the posture of aloofness and arrogance, trust me, we do not need to add to the list! Rather, our prophetic voice should always include and offer to people, the opportunity for reflection, repentance and renewal!

There is a clear reason for this.

This text suggests that relationships are never perfect. Which of us is not conscious of the truth that relationships offer us focus, gratification and meaningful contact among other things? And which of

us is not equally conscious that relationships are also characterized by rebellion, disconnection and inconsistency/hypocrisy? Many of us have been at the receiving end! Relationships therefore, are a combination of the good and the not so good! The Jews did not have a perfect relationship with God and they had a far from perfect relationship with one another. That is life!!! It is normal, it is hardly ever ideal but it is normal!

We often make the mistake, even as church, of seeking perfection from the imperfect. We often beat up on others and ourselves when we fail in the elusive search for perfection in both our divine and human relationships. Why else do you think that mercy and grace are gifts from God offered to us over and over again?

The starting place for reconnection at all levels is to admit our limitations. So, even as we speak with a prophetic voice, one which opens doors for reflection, repentance and renewal in this changing world, let us never forget that we are fallible, we make mistakes; we get it wrong sometimes.

Ours is the task to hold in one hand our role to call a spade a spade, to be uncompromising in our declaration of God's desire and design but ours is also the task to hold in the other hand, God's gifts of mercy and grace.

WE ARE CALLED TO PURSUE VALUE-ADDED PARTNERSHIPS

The text makes it clear that God has expectations.

These people who had a history and a legacy with God believed that all God required was a ritualistic relationship. The practices of fasting and Sabbath keeping are pivotal here and God addresses them.

In response to their acts of fasting, God engages in rhetorical mockery (5-7) – is this the fast I choose; is it to humble yourself, bow down and to lie in sackcloth, is it acceptable to me? To each is a resounding no! Such self-sacrifice is completely mistaken because they fast for their own interests and they fail to see the plight of their neighbours.

The Sabbath (13) was a means of identification; “we do this because we belong to Yahweh.” It was also a symbol of protest and resistance and an indication of their freedom. It was a defiant declaration to their oppressors, “you can take my land and restrict me but you cannot take my religion!” Yet, God declared that things other than righteousness drove their participation in Sabbath keeping.

These were the people who had a legacy of liberation at the hand of Yahweh. And instead of liberating others, they oppressed them. They were insensitive and hard; their treatment of others shamed their religion!

God does not expect perfection; God expects consistency between our identity and our actions – God expects justice and right living. God does not desire ritual, God desires a relationship; God never affirms labels, God affirms people; God does not imprison, God liberates! Failure to live up to these expectations

alienates us from God and in such instances God will not see, notice, or hear us (3-4).

The message is clear; unless we pursue value-added relationships God will not respond to our offerings of worship.

It is both radical and sobering.

It is radical, for unless we engage people and partner them in transforming the death dealing forces of poverty, injustice, inhumanity and inequity, prevalent in our times, God has little desire to see, notice or hear us! It is more than offering a set liturgy, great worship and an organized and efficient congregation. Instead, it is to partner people beyond worship and 'church' as an acceptable act of continued worship and witness.

It is sobering because the challenge is not merely to tackle the manifestation of these maladies but to attack the root causes – the breaking of the yoke (6) loosing, opening, freeing. We are to engage in a partnership which enables us to listen and understand, to wrestle with the relevance of church among competing loyalties, to go into the uncomfortable places, to get close to those who are different, to advocate for those imprisoned by dons, gangs and systems, to get our hands and feet dirty as we seek to make a transforming difference wherever we are!

But there is more here. We are to turn away from that which benefits us but which at the same time oppresses or causes distress to our brothers and sisters. Self-serving leadership or follower-ship, for

that matter, is unacceptable to God! God is about loyalty not selfish rebellion; God is about reconnection, not disconnection; God is about consistency not hypocrisy; God is about righteousness not self-righteousness; God is about justice not injustice; God is about equality and equity not abuse and discrimination.

The church, you and I, should add value to our relationships with one another, we must never, ever, to devalue them!

Pretense is the Achilles heel of any community. We are clear about God's expectations but can't always read the minds of those around us which is why the church more than any other community must add value to relationships by applying the values and principles of God. It must never render like for like, and must never become the victimizer of others. It must seek consistency in both words and deeds.

WE ARE CALLED TO OFFER A CARE-GIVING PRESENCE

Relationships are often governed by priorities and priorities influence attitudes and attitudes determine actions.

In our text, the conviction, priority, attitude and actions all pointed to self-interest. Their worship, practices and relationships were driven by the "what's in it for me?" principle. A caregiver cannot live by such a principle; you cannot consistently feed, house, clothe, embrace and journey with others if your motive is that of self-interest.

Care-giving is nothing more and nothing less than grace – selfless service. I like John’s account of the twin miracles of the feeding of the five thousand and the walking on the water, for the tension in those accounts was between Jesus’ glory and Jesus’ grace. The people could only see the glory – the powerful miracles and intrigued by Jesus’ power, they sought to make Jesus ruler over them. Jesus instead, pointed them to His grace – care-giving – feeding the hungry, providing relief to those battered by the winds and waves and redirecting faith. It was Jesus’ nature, his glory, which allowed him to offer his grace – caring for and meeting the needs of others.

The truth is sometimes as church we are far more interested in the glory than we are the grace. We are often dazzled by and preoccupied with our place, power, capacity and authority when what should engage us is the grace of which we are beneficiaries and which we ought to extend as a divine gift to others!

This passage declares that when our convictions are grounded in God, exercised through our faith and supported by our actions, then and only then does God see, notice, hear and respond with the “Here I am,” I am with you, in you, and living through you!

One final thought. Our text begins with a word, a prophetic word, but ends with a care-giving presence. The church which is preoccupied and engaged with its care-giving role and presence will not only *say* to a rebellious, disconnected and inconsistent world, but also *demonstrate* its tremendous God-given capacity to

be open, tolerant, responsive, affirming and supportive so that all will be able to hear and see God, saying and acting through us, **'Here I am!'**

We are called as church, along with these ordinands to be church in a changing world, to be prophetic not perfect, to offer value-added partnerships and to offer a care-giving presence.

May God help us to be and so to do.