



Advent Reflection for Wednesday, December 20, 2023

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Isaiah 58:1-5

Shout out; do not hold back!
Lift up 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;
they ask of me righteous judgments;
they want God on their side.
“Why do we fast, but you do not see?
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day
and oppress all your workers.
You fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.
Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.
Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the Lord?

Today's Reflection is by Michael Hendrick

At first read, I thought the author was exhorting his people to stop being hypocrites, to practice what they preach, and to choose good deeds over blind adherence to the law.

After a little context digging I read that, in this passage of Isaiah, the author is most likely addressing those who had returned from exile in Babylon.

In my opinion, this would be still be sound advice, exile or not. However, the fact that the author is addressing a community of former exiles- who are potentially struggling to reintegrate in their native land - is significant, and for me changes how the passage resonates.

Given the state of our current world, I feel compelled to say I know nothing of the pain, anxiety and longing that I imagine someone actually living in exile would experience. These days, examples of actual exile abound, very close to home in fact. But exile is a recurring theme in the Bible and as readers and practitioners we are accustomed by now to see exile as a metaphor for many things in our lives such as loneliness, spiritual estrangement, and pain. To me, it also can mean a time of austere contemplation, of transformation and readying myself for a new chapter in my life.

Perhaps Isaiah's appeals to the Jews arriving back from Babylon are reassurance to those who have returned home that they can be human again. Blind adherence to the law may have comforted them in exile, but now they are free to use their own judgment. Fear and isolation are giving way to openness, connection with community and compassion for others.

In my life, I am significantly less charitable when under stress, especially when I'm so accustomed to the stress that I hardly notice it. When my basic needs are not being met, I judge, I hold others to standards that I can't even meet myself and I constantly compare myself with others. Stress is a part of life, but God offers me a path away from the troll-like existence of stress-induced self-imposed exile.

Advent feels like a home-coming. The promise of Jesus's birth gives us all something to look forward to. The promise that this God incarnate will teach us how to love one another and forgive us of our sins is enough to bring us all out of our exiles.



Michael lives in Park Slope with lovely wife Magda and their two amazing sons Samuel and Daniel. They have been attending Holy Apostles since the Fall of 2022.