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Sermon: 10th August 2025: 8th after Trinity

St Mary's Todmorden, St Michael's Cornholme and St Peter's Walsden

Isaiah 1: 1, 10-20 ¹The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. ¹⁰Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! ¹¹What 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 goats. ¹²When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; ¹³bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon, sabbath and calling of convocation, I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. ¹⁴Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. ¹⁵When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. ¹⁶Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; 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. 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. ¹⁹If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; ²⁰but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16 ¹Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ²Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. ³By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible. ⁸By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. ¹²Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, 'as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.' ¹³All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, ¹⁴for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

Luke 12: 32-40 ³²'Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. ³³Sell your possessions and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. ³⁴For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. ³⁵'Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; ³⁶be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. ³⁷Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. ³⁸If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves. ³⁹'But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁰You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.'



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Sermon: Sodom and Gomorrah are names and places that have gone down in Christian history as by-words for sin, particularly sexual sin, so much so that one pejorative term for same-sex relationships became sodomy and people like Oscar Wilde were imprisoned as sodomites.

In fact, this legacy of the sacking at Sodom does not lend itself to the condemnation of same-sex relationships nearly so well as centuries of homophobia have tried to make out. It is actually an early example of hostility to the stranger, a bit like contemporary protests by the aggressive crowds surrounding hotels where asylum seekers are housed. And Lot's attempt to substitute his daughters as sex objects in place of the male guests for whom the crowd was calling, does not stand up to much moral scrutiny either.

Today's first reading, from Isaiah is written much later than the book of Genesis which features the original story of Sodom and Gomorrah, but it is clear that by Isaiah's day, Sodom and Gomorrah were already by-words for sinfulness – though in Isaiah it is the sin of idolatry not sexual sin. In fact all sin is the sin of idolatry, the sin of putting something in the place of God, whether sex or money or our own religious practices, piety or pride.

And in the Isaiah passage today, God, through the prophet Isaiah, condemns the idolatry of meaningless religious practices, which simply are not going to cut it. Offerings of blood, fat, incense and burnt-offerings of the flesh of bulls, lambs and other livestock whose blood has been shed, are not what God wants. And they are especially not what God wants as an alternative to acting like decent human beings; human beings who, “do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”

The message is clear – do the right thing, don't try to buy God off with a performance and show of religiosity but do the real, spiritual thing and seek justice, defend and plead for those who are poor and outcast; rescue the oppressed and above all don't oppress them, especially not with religiosity. Do not indulge in idolatry which is what is involved in offering meaningless sacrifices and rituals, designed to make people feel good rather than actually doing good.

This message, of doing good, not just feeling good, is reinforced in the reading from Luke's Gospel where Jesus says, “³³Sell your possessions and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys...”

It is the same message as last weekend's Gospel; do good, do justice, share your material possessions and the good gifts of life. Live life and build the kingdom of heaven rather than hoarding wealth, whether by building the barns of last week's rich man or the pointless purses or religious sacrifices of this week's readings. Above all don't make wealth an idol...

These two ideas, readings and idolatries are linked because making rich religious offerings, for example slaughtering and offering a big expensive animal like a bull instead of a lamb or a dove, is showing off riches just as much as building a barn for the produce of your land. Neither course of behaviour impresses God and nor should it impress human beings, God's children.

The other peril of riches and showing them off is that it all too often leads to the sin of pride; taking satisfaction in the wealth we think we've been clever or wise or hard working enough to amass.

Crediting ourselves with the wealth and the generous offerings they can make to God rather recognising that it is God's blessing, God's provision, that gives wealth in the first place.

As well as the idolatry of obsession with wealth and getting rich, of storing up riches instead of sharing them, there is the idolatry of human pride and placing humanity in God's place.



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Yet, despite Jesus' warnings about wealth, human beings continue to pile up treasure and wealth and economies across the world continue to enable the amassing of wealth by some at the expense of others' labour or unemployment and at the expense and exploitation of the environment.

It was ever thus, which is why Jesus reassures his hearers, "32 'Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.'" Many of those listening to him would have been people whose livelihoods were at the mercy of the Roman empire and Roman soldiers governing Israel and the lands around Galilee on the Imperial trade routes.

It would have been a natural instinct to want to preserve what they could to protect from an unknown future and invading, occupying kingdom; to protect from wars, attacks and raids such as history records happened more than once in Jerusalem and in other towns around the region.

Yet Jesus comes to say don't be afraid, live life as fully as you can regardless of the occupying powers because this is not the real kingdom; you will inherit the real kingdom, God's kingdom, not the kingdom of earthly powers. And we inherit the kingdom by living life to the full; we inherit and build God's kingdom by seeking to enable all to do so, including those who are often excluded. We inherit the kingdom by doing God's will, seeking justice, rescuing the oppressed, defending the orphan, pleading for the widow and all who are most vulnerable.

And Jesus comes to show us what this looks like. Jesus does not come as a powerful Roman prince or son of the governor. Nor does he get born as the offspring of the leading Jewish families, the son of a priest or scribe or Pharisee. Instead, as it says in our collect today, he "...left the riches riches of heaven and became poor for our sake:"

When he says, "Don't be afraid, little flock" he not only loves the people but speaks to them from experience of being ordinary, insignificant, vulnerable, not a person of power, from a powerful family, but from a poor little town up in the Northern hills, the son of a carpenter. Essentially, he is telling his audience, that is OK; God is still with you, live the life you have, use and share the gifts you have and don't worry about riches, impressive offerings or other status symbols.

So let us today take care not to be swept up in the idolatry of riches, of impressive sacrifices, of placing things before God. That is not to say we don't enjoy the things of this world, but we enjoy them remembering that all things come from God, not relegating God to the margins. And that includes in our churches too, which I think is well-captured in this poem by Barbara Messner:

Do Not Be Afraid, Little Flock

Little flocks in our churches are dwindling. Can we hear his words: "Don't be afraid!"?
Is God's Kingdom in need of rekindling, or is Church a possession we've made?

If we're asked what it is that we treasure, is it prayer books and organs and stone,
or is meeting together our pleasure, sharing caring and bread, not alone?

Are we waiting to hear Jesus knocking? Do we find him already inside?
Are there spaces still needing unlocking? Are we open, or hoarding our pride?

When we sing to God's praise, are our voices full of joy that the Kingdom is near?
Is the Spirit the guide to our choices? In our love is Christ's presence made clear?

Unexpected, he comes. Are we ready? Will we know him stripped bare and made poor?
Can we step out to join him, unsteady in our fear of the wind, far from shore?

Can we reach for his hand and be lifted? Do the waves of our chaos subside?
Can we wait in his peace, and be gifted, with the strength to move on at his side?