

Have you ever come to any hour of the Office and been present only physically? Have you ever felt that God was far away and so you did what was expected of you but nothing more?

The prophet Isaiah is addressing the return of the exiles. When they saw Jerusalem and the rest of the country in ruins they must have been overwhelmed and discouraged. How could they be God's people without a Temple?

In Babylon they had substituted worship in the Synagogue and bought it back with them. But are they living in a way that reflects their covenant relationship with God? In the previous chapters, Isaiah criticized their formal worship; fasts and Sabbath keeping as unworthy of the Lord. He tells them they are just going through the motions but their hearts are not in it. He says, in God's voice, "Is this the fast I have chosen? A day for man to afflict his soul? Is it to bow his head like bulrush and spread sackcloth and ashes under him?"

It's only the external form. If it is not an expression of the heart, it is not acceptable to God.

So how can we worship God in a way that is more whole hearted?

The prophet seems to imply that there are some personal issues we need to tackle, mostly concerning how we treat others.

"If you take away from the midst of you the Yoke, the pointing of the finger, speaking of wickedness." These are blame, gossip, putting others in the box of our expectations, contempt, judgement and the like. I don't know about you, but this certainly gives ME pause. What would our life in Community be like if things like these vanished from our midst?

He goes on "If you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted THEN shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as noonday".

Isaiah says that God will then not seem remote but present and will guide us into restoration. Here God promises that we will be like a watered garden, a spring of water, whose waters fail not.

Lastly, the returned exiles are encouraged to take Sabbath seriously. It is one way of worship that is portable. That could be practiced anywhere. Keeping the Sabbath Holy involves restoring their loyalty to God. This means no secular preoccupations.

We take up this issue again in the Gospel.

Our Gospel today is also about the Sabbath. Jesus has his own particular take on Sabbath obligations. The scribes and tradition forbade work on the Sabbath.

Among ultra-orthodox Jews elevators are programmed to automatically stop on every floor so that nobody has to break the Sabbath by pushing the button. Or a family might ask a Gentile neighbor to turn on the oven so the food can be hot for Shabbat dinner. For the observant Jewish cook to do so would be considered work thus breaking the Sabbath.

Don't think Christians are immune from thinking this way. Remember Blue Laws? No shopping on Sunday. In some Christian groups playing games or other frivolous amusements were forbidden on Sundays.

During Jesus time one could only heal on the Sabbath if it was a life or death situation. Here Jesus heals on the Sabbath, in the Synagogue no less, when it is NOT a life or death situation. He heals a woman who has a chronic infirmity – she has been bent over for 18 years. The culture of that time associated sickness with sin. (See Job) This poor woman must have had to endure judgement and disapproval. As a woman she had reduced status in her Community. Jesus pronounced her free of her infirmity. He confers on her a status of dignity, calling her a daughter of Abraham. He lays hands on her and she is healed instantly. Those who witness her healing rejoiced with her.

Well, almost all of them do. The leader of the Synagogue is upset this occurred on the Sabbath. He seems to consider healing to be work and therefore a violation of the Sabbath. He says “there are six days for work, come to be healed on those days”. Jesus rebukes him. He points out that those who observe the Sabbath show kindness to their animals by leading them to water on the Sabbath. How much more mercy should be shown to a daughter of Abraham on the Sabbath.

It's all about priorities isn't it? Is it more important to keep the Sabbath or to act compassionately? Are people our priority? They clearly were for Jesus. I have to ask myself the same questions when I am asked to do something out of my comfort zone. Am I putting my own plans or preferences first? Will I put others needs ahead of my own?

Mother Harriet encouraged us to make the transition from finding God in Chapel, to finding God in those to whom we minister. AND I might add those with whom we live.

Our goal is to love God and our neighbors, I hope to have these as my priorities.