

OPENING COLLECT

O God, you know us to be set in the midst of so many and great dangers, that by reason of the frailty of our nature we cannot always stand upright: grant to us such strength and protection as may support us in all dangers and carry us through all temptations; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen**

FIRST READING: Isaiah 58.1-9a, (9b-12)

Thus says the LORD: ¹ 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. ² Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practised righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgements, they delight to draw near to God. ³ '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. ⁴ Look, 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. ⁵ 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? ⁶ Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? ⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? ⁸ Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rearguard. ⁹ Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,

Cont.: ¹⁰ if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. ¹¹ The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

¹² Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

Notes: Isaiah

The Gospel passages for the Sundays before Lent are mainly from the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus challenges his followers to live the life of love for the glory of God. This had always been the challenge facing the People of God (in the Scriptures), though there are other, and later, passages, which obscure the challenge by emphasising the need for righteous behaviour in order to obtain God's blessing, and are little concerned with their wider mission. In our linked passage for today, Third Isaiah (56-66) recalls this earlier challenge.

Epistle: 1 Corinthians 2.1-12, (13-16)

¹ When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. ² For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. ³ And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. ⁴ My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵ so that your faith might rest not on human

The key is in v.6. All their religiosity, all their fasting and piety, will be of little use, unless they serve God in the world. God's servants must fight injustice, break down oppression, share their 'bread' and cover the naked. That is how we glorify God, not just by being morally good, but by sharing his love in order to build his Kingdom. In this endeavour, the Lord will be our strength (vv.8-9).

Epistle continued: wisdom but on the power of God. 6 Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. 7 But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. 8 None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. 9 But, as it is written, 'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him' – 10 these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. 11 For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. 12 Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. [13 And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual. 14 Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are discerned spiritually. 15 Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny. 16 'For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?' But we have the mind of Christ.]

Gospel: Matthew 5.13–20

Jesus went up the mountain and was joined by his disciples. Then he began to teach them: 13 'You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. 14 You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. 17 Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. 18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. 19 Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.'

Epistle: For the Epistle, we read from the opening chapters of 1 Corinthians. Having given thanks, earlier, that the young church has been enriched by God, Paul now seems to address a problem in the congregation- who are the best disciples?! Some, perhaps, are boasting that they were taught by better pastors, or, in some other way, one step ahead of the rest. Paul wants to assure them that we are all equal. The key to their conversion and new life is the passion of Christ and their faith and way of discipleship spring from the Spirit and power of God.

Good discipleship is not about physical strength or intellectual ability, but about understanding 'bestowed upon us by God' and being open to his Spirit, so that we may be used, by God, to walk the way of Christ crucified and live the life of love in the world, for the benefit of all God's children.

And so to the **Gospel**. Although the Epistle is not chosen to link to the theme of the Gospel, like the Isaiah passage, we may conclude that, in this part of the Sermon, Jesus is challenging his disciples in a very similar way. 'You are (to be) the light of the world, he tells them, and the salt of the earth', and this means living in a particular way. Your words must lead to deeds, we might say, so that others 'may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven' (v.16). Since this is part of Matthew's presentation of the story of Jesus, written, we suppose, for people with a Jewish background, Jesus goes on to explain, as elsewhere in the Sermon that he is not challenging the teaching of the Law, at this point, but, rather, showing how it is to be 'fulfilled' in the lives of God's People. As Paul says (Romans 13.10) "love is the fulfilling of the Law". Poor old Pharisees, they come in for criticism at the end (v.20), but 'living by love' is not just about moral righteousness, or keeping your nose clean! The following Collect sums it up.

Post-Communion Collect :

Go before us, Lord, in all we do with your most gracious favour, and guide us with your continual help, that in all our works begun, continued and ended in you, we may glorify your holy name, and finally by your mercy receive everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord.