

“Be righteous and ... righteous!” Isaiah 56:1-8

**Thus says the LORD: “Keep justice, and do righteousness,
for soon my salvation will come,
and my righteousness be revealed.
Blessed is the man who does this,
and the son of man who holds it fast,
who keeps the Sabbath, not profaning it,
and keeps his hand from doing any evil.”
Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say,
“The LORD will surely separate me from his people”;
and let not the eunuch say,
“Behold, I am a dry tree.”
For thus says the LORD:
“To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,
who choose the things that please me
and hold fast my covenant,
I will give in my house and within my walls
a monument and a name
better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
that shall not be cut off.
“And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD,
to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD,
and to be his servants,
everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it,
and holds fast my covenant—
these I will bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house shall be called a house of prayer
for all peoples.”
The Lord GOD,
who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares,
“I will gather yet others to him
besides those already gathered.”**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Today we have for our meditations the reading from the book of Isaiah. It is a wonderful, wonderful book. It is written in beautiful poetry and it is saturated with Good News, celebrating and marvelling about what God Yahweh has done and where He is leading us, to the New Heavens and New Earth. Our problem is that we struggle to fully appreciate and enjoy it. Why?

It is not an easy book to read, and it is not an easy book to understand. One of my professors in St Louis used to say that this book is written so that we would read it many, many times. And then with every next time, as we take Isaiah's message in, we are able to connect a few more dots and to make sense of a few more verses.

Thus, also our today's reading seems to be a little bit mysterious. But there is something precious in it. It speaks about two very important teachings, which every Christian needs to know and understand and be able to explain to others.

If we do not get them right, if we do not understand them, we are robbed of the greatest of comforts that the Word of God brings us, and we may also be confused about what it means to live as Christians. So, what are these two teachings?

In Isaiah's own words, they are teachings about two kinds of righteousness, as we can read in verse one. "... do righteousness... and God will reveal His righteousness..." What are these two kinds of righteousness? How do they differ?

But first we need to ask – what does this word "righteousness" mean in the Bible? It's not something we use in our vernacular. You can explain it this way, – that righteousness or being righteous means that you live in the right relationships and have ordered your life in the right way according to certain standards, in this case, according to the will of our Creator.

Remember, Isaiah speaks about two kinds of righteousness. One is of our doing, but the other is about God's doing. Or we could say – our righteousness and God's righteousness. Now, these are the two teachings that we need to nail, if we want to get the Biblical message and our Christian lives right.

Let's talk about God's righteousness first. What does it mean? It would simply mean to live in the right relationships with the Triune God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. What are those right relationships?

How did Jesus put it? You shall love your God with all your heart and soul and mind. Or as Luther put it in the Small Catechism, – you shall fear, love and trust the one true God above all things. Sounds pretty clear, and rather simple.

There is more, this righteousness comes as a bundle deal – together with salvation. If you have this righteousness with God, then you have also His salvation. And that means that we are rescued from sin, from devil and even from death.

It means, that if you have acquired this God's righteousness, then from God's perspective there is nothing in you anymore that would anger Him and would turn Him away from you in displeasure.

It means that our relationships with the very source of life are fully restored and intact. And that means that when this age is over, we will be welcomed in the eternal city of the holy God to live and to reign with Him and to rejoice in eternal blessedness with the multitudes of His saints. That is what this salvation means.

But how do we get this God's righteousness that brings us so many benefits? For as we know from the Scripture – we all are born spiritually dead in our sins, we are born in the slavery to the ruler of this world, we are born to our very core hostile to the true God.

This we can also know from our own experience. There is no human being who is naturally looking for the true God. We are quick to trust and love idols, and we are very passionate to be independent and to do our own thing, but no one, not one [!] is looking for the true God on their own.

If that is our situation, then how can we obtain this righteousness with God? We can't, or our own we don't even want to. This is where we see the incredible graciousness and care of our God. When we are still dead in our sins, when we are still hostile to Him to the very core of our hearts, He comes to us.

He comes to restore our relationships. He loves us first. He speaks to us first. He reveals Himself and He invites you into the wonderful fellowship with Him, with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. And as He speaks to us, He indwells in us, His Spirit takes home with you, and you are embraced in the divine family.

Or we can say, we are made righteous with God. He makes you righteous. But when He does it, when He restores our relationships, He doesn't ignore our past, He doesn't ignore all the malevolence and foolishness that dwells in our hearts, and that has spilled over in our lives so many times. He doesn't just forget about it. He deals with it. He takes the responsibility for all the consequences upon Himself.

The Suffering Servant, in Isaiah 53, He gets crushed and pierced because of our iniquities, He receives our punishment, and because of this exchange – our punishment on Him, and His holiness on us – He makes many righteous. The righteousness with God is a very expensive gift, and we can receive it only as a gift, for we really aren't capable of doing anything to obtain it.

The price is already paid, the Suffering Servant, whom we know as Jesus Christ, has paid for it in full. We can only receive this gift with humble and grateful hearts, and praise our God for His prodigal generosity. This is how we receive God's righteousness and this is how we receive our salvation. As His gracious gift.

This is the first teaching; the most important teaching of the Bible. The most joyful teaching of the Bible. The Gospel of God grace. That while we were still sinner, our God humbled Himself to the death on the cross, triumphed over the forces that enslaved us, – over sin and death and devil, and restored our relationships.

He did all of that. For you! Before we even knew. Now He desires that we honour what He has done by receiving this gift of righteousness and enjoying it with grateful hearts and with songs of praise in the community of God's saints.

Now, when someone does something good for you, something incredibly gracious, how do we even respond? And this is where we get to our second teaching. To the

other righteousness, our righteousness. We can't get God's righteousness on our own, but once we have gotten it, He also enables us to live in the right way. The truth is that without first receiving God's righteousness we can't do our righteousness either; we can't be righteous with one another.

If our hearts don't know the love and affection of our Creator and Redeemer, if we don't know how precious and how valued we are, that He accepts and affirms us, we need to get this boost of confidence for ourselves somewhere else, from others.

And as we search for it, we turn even our good actions into something selfish. For if we do good, so that we may feel good about ourselves and to show others how good we are, then, ultimately, we don't do these good things for other. We do them for ourselves, selfishly, and sometimes in our foolishness and arrogance we may even think that that is how we earn God's favour. It doesn't work that way...

But once we have received God's righteousness, He enables us to be righteous with others. Then He reveals us fully what His will, His wisdom for our lives is, He gives it to us in the Ten Commandments, fully and deeply understood.

We can put it this way, as Paul explains it to us in his letter to Ephesians. We are not made righteous and saved *by* our good works, we are saved and made righteous *for* good works. Our righteousness flows out of God's righteousness.

Or love for our neighbours flows out of our God's love for us. Our good works flow out of God's goodness to us. The more we are loved the more we are capable of loving other. And in the situation with our God, He can't actually love us more, He already loves us with His whole heart and mind and soul, it is us who need to be made aware of His steadfast love and faithfulness.

This is the main message of the Bible. This is the main message of Christianity. "This is love, not that we have (or could) loved God, but that He loved us..." (1 John 4:10). This is the message that we need to hear again and again, every day, day after day. For this is the message that transforms us, that makes us righteous with God and that enables us to live righteous life with our neighbours.

This is why the Holy Spirit has not stopped speaking to us. He spoke through Isaiah and the prophets. He spoke through Jesus and then His apostles. Today He still speaks through the Scripture and through all His people.

And as you listen to Him speaking, He brings you God's righteousness and God's salvation, He makes you righteous, and He enables you to lead a righteous life. These are the two teachings that we need to remember, on which we need to reflect and marvel about, and which we need to share with others.

And may our gracious God, who has made you righteous and who fills you with the desire to lead righteous life, may He use us "to gather here yet other, beside those already gathered so that His house can be called a house of prayer for all peoples!" Amen.