

## 21 August 2022: Isaiah 58:9b-14 (Proper 16)

From the prophet Isaiah: *If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil....* Today's first reading and Gospel begin with images of oppression. The promise is: restoration, healing, joy. Isaiah says sin is like a yoke. Oxen and mules are yoked so the farmer may control them. In the same way our sins yoke us to evil, depriving us of true freedom. A fantastic lie is that evil gives us unlimited choices and holiness restrains us. It is the opposite: the yoke of sin restrains us; the yoke of holiness frees us. While this is most obvious with those addicted, it is true of every habitual, compulsive sin of thought, speech, and action.

Isaiah has a specific sin in mind: *the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil...* These are sins as old as creation: did not Adam say when confronted by God, *the woman...gave me fruit from the tree...* (Genesis 3:12). Eve blamed the serpent; both tried to deflect responsibility. 'Pointing the finger, speaking evil' is a perennial temptation: as we focus on the faults of others, we can ignore our own sins and repent. It takes courage to turn one's attention from others' faults and look honestly at oneself. It takes humility to admit we—as fallible and fallen as anyone—cannot possibly be judge and jury of others' failings. It takes energy—spiritual, emotional, and physical energy—to offer one's complete life to God—faults and all—day by day. Pointing the finger and speaking of others' evil is a symptom of spiritual immaturity.

Concentrating on others' failings is epidemic. Why do people watch the orgies of human catastrophe called 'reality shows?' After viewing such grotesque failing, we can say "At least I'm *not* as messed up as *those* people!" Why are political differences excuses for character assassination? We cannot justify ourselves by claiming, 'the other side started it!' Accusation is incompatible with humility; an 'eye-for-an-eye' attitude kills charity.

A Fifth Century monk named Poemen said: *Everything that the soul does not desire, does not remain long.* If one's desire comes from wounded self-loathing a critical spirit grows. If one's desire is built on fear, other people are only threats to our trembling egos. If your desire is for spiritual wholeness and salvation, your own and others', forbearance, forgiveness, and joy take root and grow. Criticizing others yokes us to darkness, leads us away from freedom and truth—the truth about ourselves.

God's Word to Isaiah provides the antidote to this spiritual disease: *offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted.* This is meant in a literal and a spiritual sense. Literally, do works of mercy for those suffering; there is no end to such opportunities. The spiritual fact is love and self-respect grow by what we give, not by dwelling on others' failings and faults. If we knew the stories of those who afflict us, we would be filled with sorrow, not contempt. This is not to excuse violence or predatory behavior. It is merely to say that those who seek to inflict the most hurt are those who are most wounded. Likewise, those who point the finger and speak evil habitually are expressing deep, untreated wounds and grave, unresolved resentment.

How might we offer food to the emotionally and spiritually wounded? The way is simple, but it needs courage and perseverance. We pray for them; fervent, repeated, longing prayer. Pray God will bless them as you would like God to bless you; pray for their healing and restoration; pray for courage that you will persevere even if others treat you shabbily. Pray for guidance, wisdom, right speech, and actions of charity in your encounters with them. Surrender all resentment, fear, and hurt to God as often as you become aware of such emotions. There may also be concrete ways that you can minister to someone less perfect than yourself. Do such things without any expectation of thanks or reciprocity. By such means you will be released from the yoke of fear, anger, and resentment. You will be free; you will live God's love for all sinners. This path is difficult and dark, you at times will be tempted to give up, give in to cynicism and despair. Press on! Such storms are not permanent no matter how often they come. Jesus is with you, will teach and strengthen you. The result is joy—unbelievable joy. How we live is always born from what we desire. Pointing the finger, speaking evil yokes us to cynicism, self-deceit, and pride; there is another yoke to put on daily that brings freedom. Jesus tells us his yoke is easy, and his cargo of love, patience, and mercy is light (Matthew 11:29-30).

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive be yours, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, now and for ever. Amen.