

5 Epiphany – Year A – February 9, 2011 - Homily
Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 112:1-10; 1 Corinthians 2:1-16; Matthew 5:13-20
Susan E. Wilmot

Exile. The word comes from the Latin *exilium*, meaning wanderer. When an entire people or ethnic population is forced or induced to leave their traditional homelands, it is called a diaspora. Some of us are familiar with that word from the New Testament Scriptures.

The people of Judah and Israel know the meaning of exile. It is at such times that God has blessed the people with prophets, whom God has raised up to offer words of judgment, words of hope, and words of comfort. The portion of Isaiah that we heard tonight is a divine indictment against the people of Judah. It concerns the heart of right worship, and more specifically the practice of fasting. This is one of those passages of Scripture that is unequivocal in its message. Let's spell it out up front. Isaiah, speaking as a prophet of God, tells the people that worship divorced from justice has no value in God's eyes. God will not respond to such hypocritical worship, because God sees beyond the external piety and rituals to the hearts and intentions of all people.

Like many priests, I get quite a few suggestions about how we ought to change our worship. In many ways, this is good, because it means we're paying attention and therefore seriously wondering what we can do to grow, or to encourage others to spend part of their journey in this community of faith. So it's rather a surprise to hear God tell us through tonight's reading that worship style has little to do with whether we attract new members, and has nothing to do with pleasing God. In fact, it isn't what we do or don't do in worship that makes a difference. It is about how authentic we are in living our faith the other six and half days of the week. Indeed, as the reading says, the people of Judah "seek after [God] and delight to know [God's] ways". These people observe plenty of religious rituals including fasting and prayer. We can say the same about Episcopalians, Lutherans, and all kinds of Christians in our own time. So why do some congregations grow rapidly, and others seem to decline drastically, if it isn't about styles of worship? The problem actually lies elsewhere, and the good news for us is that Isaiah not only tells us what the problem is, but how to correct it, according to God's will.

Self-imposed spiritual exile occurs for many reasons, perhaps including feeling that we are not heard, or somehow not valued, or confirmed in our ministries. The people of Judah are told that even in their pious religious observances they are effectively exiling themselves from God, because their fasting "serves their own interests", and they fast "only to quarrel and fight" and act out violently against others. It's a classic case of 'talking the talk' but not 'walking the walk'. The more self-conscious and pious we get about our worship, the less open we are to God's vision for authentic community. Having a pity party – going into exile if you will – usually means that we are focused on self rather than God. If we're busy pushing our own agenda, pleasing ourselves, just going through the motions, feeling unappreciated, angry or fearful, or are busy critiquing, then we are much too busy to hear God, to experience God's word, or to notice how God wants to change us. Change is painful and uncomfortable, yet necessary. When we most want to be in control, when we most want everything to be the way we want it to be that is when we most need

to stop, look and listen to God. If we ignore these symptoms of rebellion, then we tend to do exactly what Isaiah says. We fight and gossip, we quarrel and we act out with hurtful words or even violence. We start to demand that our opinions be heard and implemented, without really caring to listen to the voices of others, or seeing the bigger picture. We 'talk the talk' loudly with raised voices, full of anxiety and fear, and we forget to 'walk the walk' graciously, with compassion, and with humility. We become exiles from the source of love and life, peace and joy, found only in God the Father, Jesus Christ our Lord, and the still small voice of the Holy Spirit. Our worship then becomes hypocritical and self-serving. We wear masks of piety rather than reveal the face of truth. The gap between seeking God's ways and actually living them becomes wider and wider, even as our frustrations and irritations become louder and larger. So what is the kind of worship that is pleasing to God? How do we find God again when we begin to wander away in discontent?

Throughout history, numerous nations have been forced into diasporas. For the Jews, theological reflection on the meaning of exile has led to the insight that God, who dwells amongst His people, also lives and suffers in exile. The good news is that God is always with us, even when we are hiding behind our masks. The prophet Isaiah redefines worship according to God's will as right relationship with God and others made manifest in ethical practices. Divine love demands justice, righteousness and compassion. But we can only practice these virtues when we are connected to their source. Fasting is a great spiritual practice that is supposed to free us from ourselves to receive the gifts of God, and to free us for service to God and our neighbors. The goal of prayer, fasting, Bible study, and all such disciplines is not personal holiness, cleansing and self-sacrifice, but a means to open ourselves and surrender to God, in order to be God's hands and feet in the world. This kind of worship leads us to do good works that are life-giving, to the glory of God's name.

True worship leads us to care for others, especially the oppressed, the hungry, the naked and the lost. True worship has little or nothing to do with reordering our liturgy, but everything to do with reordering our lives in community. Worship is about how God transforms us. Authentic Christian living flows from the kind of worship that compels us to put our faith into action to heal a hurting world, and care for the least amongst us. The growing congregations are not those who try to be something they are not, or offer a flavor-of-the-month worship experience, but the ones that listen to God, respond in love, and live their faith, especially when it comes to promoting God's justice and compassion.

If we have found ourselves feeling exiled from God, and pointing fingers, then it is perhaps because we have forgotten what God really demands of us – to share our bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into our house, to clothe the naked, and not to pretend that we don't see injustice around us. God desires to bless us, but God also desires obedience, faithfulness, and compassionate lives. Ultimately, that's what makes us shine and attracts others to God's light.

Amen.