

THE HOLINESS OF GOD AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Isaiah 64:1–12; Luke 19:1–10

Martin Bleby

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—
as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil—
to make your name known to your adversaries,
so that the nations might tremble at your presence! (Isa. 64:1).

We are now looking towards Christmas, when we think of the coming of God in Jesus Christ. Tomorrow in some churches is Advent Sunday—‘advent’ means ‘coming’—here Isaiah and his friends are praying that God would come:

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!

This is not a quiet and gentle coming, but a disruptive coming.
When God comes, He has a job of work to do:

We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.
We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
There is no one who calls on your name,
or attempts to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us,
and have delivered [Heb melted] us into the hand of our iniquity (Isa. 64:6–7).

This is why God needed to come and do it, because we are incapable of doing it ourselves—we are not even in a position of wanting it to change.

In particular: ‘all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth’. We can make pretty clear distinctions between what is right and what is wrong—what is righteous and what is unrighteous—and for the most part we want to avoid what is wrong and do what is right, and we think that is what reasonably keeps us on the right track. But here is another admission that we may never come to in a lifetime, but which Isaiah and his friends came to: ‘all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth’.

We think that must be just a deferential way of saying things before God, because we do not want to put ourselves too far forward in the presence of God. We may hesitate to compare our righteousness with that of God—even though God looks to us for a righteousness that matches His own, since He made us in His own image (see Lev. 19). But what if we, like Isaiah and his friends, actually come to see that this is how it is—that even our righteous deeds are tainted and polluted—what will have happened to us to bring us to that conclusion, and where would that leave us?

I heard someone say recently that he had come to the realisation that our *best* efforts, as well as our more obvious sins, need God’s forgiveness. In that he included our Bible-reading and our praying. In Psalm 80 there is a verse that says:

O LORD God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people’s prayers? (Psa. 80:4).

Why would God be angry with our prayers? Isn't praying something that He wants us to do? Shouldn't God be pleased when He sees His people praying? What is it about us and our prayers that would make Him angry? Yet the people in Psalm 80 know that God is angry with their prayers, and that is why they ask Him to do something about it:

Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved (Psa. 80:3).

It's like asking God to 'tear open the heavens and come down', as Isaiah and his friends were doing in Isaiah 64.

Earlier, back in Isaiah 58, Isaiah as a prophet had been told by God to:

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 (Isa. 58:1).

Yet the situation into which Isaiah was told to shout out looked on the surface as if there was nothing wrong with it—especially as far as religious observance was concerned. God Himself admitted:

Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God (Isa. 58:2).

What could be wrong with any of that? Isn't that what we are supposed to be doing most of all: seeking God, delighting to know His ways, asking for righteous judgements, delighting to draw near to God? This is what the people really believed they were doing—what could be rebellious or sinful about that?

In Isaiah's day, what underlay all that religious activity and the whole approach to life that went with it was one fatal flaw: in all that they did, the people were serving their own interest (Isa. 58:3) and pursuing their own interests (Isa. 58:13). Isn't that our common default mode, that we slip back into most readily—whatever it is that is most convenient for us, and that suits us best, and that furthers our own interests? Isn't that why Paul the apostle told us to 'look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others' (Phil. 2:4), as Jesus did (he's the only one who really has)?

It doesn't stop there, of course. The moment we make our own interests determinative in what we do, then what we do will be at the expense and to the disadvantage and detriment of others. If my interests are paramount, and it comes to a choice between my interests or yours, then as far as I am concerned it will be my interests rather than yours—and you will be the same—so it will be a power struggle, and a conflict, and an attempt to put the other down and raise yourself up. So God went on to say what was happening in the middle of all that religious observance:

Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist (Isa. 58:4).

And He said, you 'oppress all your workers' (Isa. 58:3), and you lay heavy burdens, and you accuse and foul-mouth one another (Isa. 58:9), and you withhold food from the hungry and satisfaction from the afflicted and needy (Isa. 58:7, 10), and you go to court for your own advantage and so bend the truth to suit yourselves, and there is violence and iniquity and the innocent suffer and there is desolation and destruction (Isa. 59:4, 6, 7).

Vivien and I first became aware of the issues of global poverty and inequality in 1972, when the churches held a massive educational program called 'Action for World Development'—something that I don't think we have seen equalled since, and there is great need for it, though it is good to see what TEAR Fund and the Micah Challenge are doing

amongst churches today. Since the 1970s the situation has become much, much worse, with the inequalities and problems becoming more acute, and entrenched in economic and military policy.

Three years ago I was with some clergy in the southern Philippines, and they asked me how much it had cost to fly me there, and they were working out how that amount compared with their own stipend and their church's budget. Their bishop had used some funding to make sure that each of his pastors had a motorbike so they could get round to their people. One of them asked me how many cars we had in our family, and at that stage we had three—one each—and he said, 'Are you going to give me one for Christmas?' We could think of all sorts of reasons why that might be impractical, and why we need what we have, and how he might have to deal with his own covetousness as we do with ours, but that is the position we are in, simply from the right we think we have to consume as much as we do when others cannot. What has someone said? 'It would take the resources of four earths—four planets the size of our earth—for everyone in the world to have the equivalent of the Australian standard of living.' Globally it is not sustainable—let alone morally. I heard of a third world Christian who knew how little they had and how they went about sharing that with the poor in their own midst talking with a western believer and hearing how much we have and saying, 'You have all that, and you call yourself a Christian?' A very different perspective.

Can we see that, whatever good we do as the church in Australia, our righteous deeds are tainted by that—no matter how much we send to the tsunami appeal and the Pakistan earthquake? And probably always will be? We always think that there is something we can do that will make it right and then we will be OK and the balance sheet will be square. When will we see that became an impossibility the moment the first human couple sinned? No matter what we do now there is nothing we can do to square off the ledger, no matter how much we try to fool ourselves that this could be possible, and may be just around the corner. Such that even 'our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth'—there is never anything we do that is entirely pure in its motivation, its processes or its outcomes. There is nothing for us ever but the grace of God! That is why He brings us to cry: 'O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!' To do that which only He can do and which, amazingly, He is more than willing to do.

A friend of mine edited the first fully 'aboriginal' history of 'South Australia'¹ for the 150 years celebration of South Australia in 1986. I have had a copy of it since then, but it is not until now that I have got round to reading it. Because I know what I will find there: what it has meant to be an 'aboriginal' person in 'South Australia' over the last 150 years of European invasion, dispossession and oppression. We still have to live with that. In the churches, our best-intentioned righteous deeds have not been immune from that. The only place for all of us is the cross of Christ—the full blast of both its judgment and its grace.

In many of the churches we are still trying to cope with the sexual abuse that has happened in our midst—another expression of trying to serve our own interests at the expense of others, both in the ways it was perpetrated and in the ways it has or has not been dealt with, and it continues to be a sorry and damaging saga. There are admissions that need to be made, and compensations that need to be paid, but we still want to get it over and done with and out of the way so we can get over it, and get on with life, and as long as we are saying that it happened to particular people and not to us all, and that it was done by particular people and we were not of the same mindset—as long as we continue to make those kinds of distinctions and dissociations—then we are still doing our darnedest to avoid coming to the place of grace where alone we meet God and ourselves in truth as we really are.

¹ Christobel Mattingley and Ken Hampton, eds, *Survival in Our Own Land*.

Surely by now in our own lives we know that what the New Testament calls ‘the flesh’—the using of our God-given persons to further our own interests over against God and at the expense of other people—is always shamefully with us, and will rear its ugly head on every possible occasion, and is always needing to be put down by us every day, and there will be no respite this side of the grave, and ‘From whom may we seek for help, but from you, Lord God, though you are justly displeased on account of our sins? And yet, Lord God almighty, most holy and most merciful Saviour, deliver us from the bitterness of eternal death’.² That is from the funeral service. It is asking God to ‘tear open the heavens and come down’—not necessarily to make us better persons so we can hold our heads high, but simply to rescue us from this ‘body of sin’ and this ‘body of death’ (Rom. 6:6; 7:24).

The new Industrial Relations legislation before the federal parliament will do it for us, don’t you think? The jury’s still out on that one. Politics will not do it for us. I suspect that there will be winners and losers on that one. The government and the employers are pushing it hard, and saying it will be good for us all. It seems they would stand to gain from it. I don’t hear many employee organizations saying what a wonderful thing it is. But how much of our high-principled opposition to it is motivated by our desire to maintain our standard of living over against the rest of the world—which brings us back to where we were before. Can anything ever be pure? What hope is there for us? ‘O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence--as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil-- to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!’ (Isa. 64:1).

Our forebears in this State of South Australia, who knew and lived in and held to the holiness and the grace of God, knew the limitations of politics to effect moral change, and they worked within those limitations. The Methodists brewed cheap beer for the working classes, so they would have something less destructive than hard spirits to drink. The early Christian feminists who wanted a better deal for wives formed the Christian Women’s Temperance Union and agitated successfully not in the first instance for abolition of alcohol but for six o’clock closing of pubs so fathers would be home with their families. So also prostitution was not banned, but just made more difficult under the law, to limit its operations. They knew that the law could make nothing perfect (see Heb. 7:19; compare 1 Tim 1:8–11); that we are shut up to the grace of God and that, short of the second coming, they would always have to work in a less than perfect situation.

Isaiah 64 is close to the end of Isaiah’s prophecy. All that went before it—of the depravity of the human condition, and of the great and wondrous promises of God—brought the people to pray that prayer, ‘O that you would tear open the heavens and come down’. So far gone were we that we would never pray that prayer of our own accord. We are brought to do it by God. And in that lies hope. For God will never get us to pray a prayer that He is not determined to answer. And in answer to that prayer, at the end of the prophecy of Isaiah, God promises that there will be new ‘heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells’ (2 Pet. 3:13; see Isa. 65:17–25; 66:22–23)—only righteousness, in all strong purity.

And there came a day when God tore open the heavens, and a baby was born, and the angels streamed out singing ‘Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth among people with whom He is well pleased!’ (see Luke 2:1–14). And there came a day when a man went down into the water and came up again, and God tore open the heavens and said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased!’ (see Matt. 3:13–17). And there came a day when the heavens turned black, and Jesus was lifted up on a cross, and he called it the judgment of this world, into which we were all drawn (see John 12:31–33), and a cry was torn out of the breast of the Son of Man, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ and

² *An Australian Prayer Book* 1978 p. 593.

he was laid in a grave in the depths of the earth. And a day came when the earth was shaken, and he rose from death, because his purity and obedience of love was such that death could not hold him. And a day will come when 'heaven and earth will pass away' (Mark 13:31) but this one will still stand, and we will stand in him, in a whole new heavens and new earth where righteousness dwells, and only righteousness.

One day Jesus came to Zacchaeus:

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.' So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, 'He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.' Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, 'Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.' Then Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.' (Luke 19:1–10).

Zacchaeus was a tax collector. People say that Jesus went to be with tax collectors and sinners, who were outcasts and oppressed minorities, and we should do the same, to effect social justice. Actually, Zacchaeus was not oppressed, but rather was an oppressor, and rich—he was doing very nicely for himself—not unlike ourselves in Australia, as we have seen. Something happened to that man. I think God tore open the heavens over his head and showered blessing on him. The way Jesus described it was that salvation had come to this house, and that Zacchaeus had become 'a son of Abraham'. That means he became like what Abraham was. Abraham 'believed God, and God reckoned it to him as righteousness' (Gen. 15:6). Zacchaeus came into this righteousness of God. He was washed, and made pure and strong before God.

Would you say that social justice was flowing out of that situation? 'Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much"' (Luke 19:8). That would have been a good start, don't you think?

Is that what would have made Zacchaeus right? Is that what was motivating Zacchaeus? I don't think that he was even thinking about that—whether he was right or wrong. He had got past that. No doubt he saw all his 'righteous deeds' as nothing more than a 'filthy cloth' Was he rejoicing in the great mercy and love and salvation of God? You bet he was. And quite a few people were being surprised by large amounts of money coming their way, as part of the spin-off from that.

There was one thing that moved Isaiah and his friends very deeply to pray, such that they mentioned it twice:

For you are our father, though Abraham does not know us
and Israel does not acknowledge us;
you, O LORD, are our father;
our Redeemer from of old is your name (Isa. 63:16).

While they acknowledged that they were unworthy to be counted among the children of Abraham, nevertheless they now knew that God was their Father, who would not leave His children in their deep distress, but come to rescue and restore them. Hence they were bold to pray, 'O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!' So also, as they prayed, they were able to say:

O LORD, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand (Isa. 64:8).

Have we come to the point, with Isaiah and his friends, where we have seen our dire necessity for that heart-rending prayer: ‘O that you would tear open the heavens and come down’? And have we the confidence to know that this prayer will be and indeed has already been answered?