

The Fifth Sunday After the Epiphany
Cycle A RCL
Revised

Isaiah 58:1-9a (9b-12)

The so-called “Third Isaiah” (Isaiah 56-66) contains oracles of hope like those of Second Isaiah (chapters 40-55) as well as oracles of warning and doom like the present one. These warning oracles stem from the end of the sixth century BC, after the return from exile in Babylon and during the difficult days in Jerusalem when residents tried both to eke out a living and to rebuild the worship of the temple. Here the author warns readers to avoid the false religiosity associated with temple worship that might substitute form and ritual for heart-felt dedication.

Psalm 112:1-9, (10)

This *alphabetic acrostic* begins each verse with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. In terms of its form and function, we have a *wisdom psalm*, a composition that celebrates the life of wisdom and piety. The poem probably had no liturgical function in the Temple. Instead, it likely came into being during the Babylonian Exile to call the demoralized Jewish community to faithful service to God despite the loss of the temple.

1 Corinthians 2:1-12, (13-16)

Although the scripture cited by Paul in 2:9 resembles Isaiah 64:4, the actual source is unknown. Explanations range from Paul citing scripture from memory to Paul using a scripture unknown to us. In contending that the “powers of this age” have been tricked into crucifying Christ, thereby insuring their own destruction (2:6-8), Paul employed an idea developed in several Gnostic works of a later time that have the forces of this world defeated by divine trickery rather than by cosmic forces. Paul’s foolishness in preaching comprises just such an ironic, divine wisdom that the powers of this age as well as his opponents cannot understand.

Matthew 5:13-20

The biblical tradition most often represents salt as a purifying agent. Consequently, Matthew 5:13-16 gives two figures for the work of the church: as the agent of purification from sin (vs. 13) and as a light to the world (vs. 14-16). The sayings about the Jewish Law in 5:17-20 stress the eternity of the Law that will not pass away until the heavens and the holy land of Israel pass away, *i. e. never*. Matthew’s Gospel is unusual among the writings of the New Testament in echoing the strict Pharisaism of Shammai, who was an older contemporary of Jesus.

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