

## Sermon, 5 March 2017: Everything has its price!

### Reading

*Isaiah 55: An Invitation to Abundant Life*

55 *Ho, everyone who thirsts,  
come to the waters;  
and you that have no money,  
come, buy and eat!  
Come, buy wine and milk  
without money and without price.*  
2 *Why do you spend your money for that  
which is not bread,  
and your labor for that which does not  
satisfy?  
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is  
good,  
and delight yourselves in rich food.*  
3 *Incline your ear, and come to me;  
listen, so that you may live.  
I will make with you an everlasting  
covenant,  
my steadfast, sure love for David.*  
4 *See, I made him a witness to the  
peoples,  
a leader and commander for the  
peoples.*  
5 *See, you shall call nations that you do  
not know,  
and nations that do not know you shall  
run to you,  
because of the Lord your God, the Holy  
One of Israel,  
for he has glorified you.*  
6 *Seek the Lord while he may be found,  
call upon him while he is near;*  
7 *let the wicked forsake their way,  
and the unrighteous their thoughts;  
let them return to the Lord, that he may  
have mercy on them,*

*and to our God, for he will abundantly  
pardon.*  
8 *For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
nor are your ways my ways, says the  
Lord.*  
9 *For as the heavens are higher than the  
earth,  
so are my ways higher than your ways  
and my thoughts than your thoughts.*  
10 *For as the rain and the snow come  
down from heaven,  
and do not return there until they have  
watered the earth,  
making it bring forth and sprout,  
giving seed to the sower and bread to  
the eater,  
11 so shall my word be that goes out from  
my mouth;  
it shall not return to me empty,  
but it shall accomplish that which I  
purpose,  
and succeed in the thing for which I  
sent it.*  
12 *For you shall go out in joy,  
and be led back in peace;  
the mountains and the hills before you  
shall burst into song,  
and all the trees of the field shall clap  
their hands.*  
13 *Instead of the thorn shall come up the  
cypress;  
instead of the brier shall come up the  
myrtle;  
and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial,  
for an everlasting sign that shall not be  
cut off.*

We all like a good deal or a freebie and these days we can find them in almost every shop. Discounts, or buy one get one free or competitions are very popular market tools to attract customers. I remember a few years ago at Geneva airport they had a competition going on in the departure hall. Those who could name the 26 Swiss cantons on a map received a shopping voucher of 50 CHF to spend at the airport. I won, of course, and it was a pretty good feeling to go on a free shopping stroll. But we know as well, and learn this from very young age, that nothing in life is for free and that everything has its price.

In reality the 50 CHF shopping voucher was not free of cost. Those who failed in the competition and all the other customers in the duty free zone who paid for their shopping indirectly paid for my freebie. Whenever we get something for free or for very cheap on the market, someone else has to pay for it, and not only in cash.

When we buy cheap t-shirts in our high street shops, underpaid workers who are ripped of their basic human rights in developing countries are paying the price.

When we buy very cheap meat and the cheapest of eggs in our supermarkets, animals pay with their lives, bred, transported and butchered under the most horrible conditions.

There are no freebies. Or are there?

Let us imagine a market, Borough market, or the Zibelemärit in Bern: herbs, spices, vegetables, meat, clothing, pottery - all kind of produce are for up sale and the salesmen and women need to get people's attention if they want to make profit. What do they do? They shout and scream. Now let us imagine an Oriental market, or more precisely, an Oriental market 2'500 years ago when Prophet Isaiah was alive. He went on the busy and lively markets to sell a very distinguished product. But unlike all the other products his product was free, and not just free for a few lucky ones, but literally for everyone. And here is what Isaiah said:

*"Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Eat what is good and delight yourself in rich food."*

Isaiah invited everybody to live a life in abundance. He reminded the people that the best and most essential products were indeed free of cost. What he offered was nothing less than the gifts of God. But so often we forget that we already have everything we need. God's gifts that Isaiah promoted include:

- Earth and rain and seeds to make bread.
- That we are loved, and able to love.
- That we are forgiven when we mess up, and our ability to forgive in return.
- The most beautiful and stunning Creation that keeps us alive, feeds us and fills our heart with joy and gratitude, which Isaiah expressed very poetically:  
*"The mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress, and it shall be to God an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off."*

Isaiah was selling a product that was free for absolutely everyone. God is not a merchant. We don't have to pay anything in return for all the essential gifts given to us. Yet in the midst of all the shouting and screaming from the other merchants with their clever deals and promises, Isaiah had a very hard time to make his voice heard. And who would have believed him anyway! It is engraved in us that nothing is for free. We believe that the more money we have, the more we get, and it is therefore no surprise that we are easily overtaken by greed. We constantly have to worry that we might not have enough for ourselves. We see others accumulating more and more goods and making profits for themselves, so it is only natural that we too want to make sure to have enough for ourselves and our family. After all, the greediness

of the others could leave us empty handed. The vicious circle of greediness is almost impossible to break.

Throughout its history, even the Church has tried to trade God's free gifts. Five-hundred years ago, the Church sold so-called Letters of Indulgence. For money, believers could reduce the amount of punishment after death and shorten their time in purgatory. The Augustin monk Martin Luther has heavily criticised this malpractice which led to the reformation of the church 500 years ago. Yet still today, churches are not immune against greed. Not only as individuals but also as church communities we are called to share what we have generously: our friendship, our talents, our building, our food and water, our love, our ability to listen and speak words of comfort and our ability to forgive.

The 55th chapter in the Book of Prophet Isaiah is one of the most beautiful poems in the Bible. I find it very moving. It is a reminder of all the things that are given for us for free. The things described in Isaiah's Psalm exist in such abundance that there is enough for everyone: *"Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price."*

Yet so often we spend our money on things we do not actually need. We spend our energy for things that do not satisfy us. Isaiah asks critically: *"Why do you spend your money for what is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy?"*

If we would spend more of our energy and labour for things that satisfy us, our bond with the world would be closer and we pave the way for greater peace between the nations: *"You shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you."*

We are so often caught in our own limited thoughts and our own narrow ways which keeps us from seeing the greater context that we all belong to. There is a dimension greater and bigger than of all us, a bigger truth which we are all part of and that we have different words for. Isaiah describes this greater dimension in the words of God: *"For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts."* Word of God

Isaiah's poem is an invitation to seek the greater truth, and to see ourselves as part of this bigger dimension. Our understanding of things will always be limited. God can never be narrowed down to one single truth and can never be described with a set of words. There is a dimension to life bigger and deeper than anything anyone can ever understand. I am sure most of you know this feeling of deep humbleness when we look up to the stars marvelling at the universe, or when we look at new born life, admiring the beauty of all being. In these moments we can feel the rhythm of God's creation and understand our place in it. It is so crucial that we never forget our place in this world. It is deeply worrying that humbleness and the awareness for God's free gifts are missing in the attitude of many public figures these days which is not an example we should follow.

Let us this Lent learn to be humble and to listen to the sound of this stunning creation we are part of. Let us learn not to be greedy but instead to generously share what we have reassured that there is enough for everyone. Humbleness does not

mean to burry our head in sand and remain silent. Quite the opposite: by becoming more humble we will grow in strength and be able to be a reflection of the incredible beauty that this world is. Let us be shining lights sharing the many free gifts with everyone.

Or as Jesus said: *“Do not light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.”*

Amen