

# A True Fast after God's Heart

A week of devotions based on Isaiah 58

I was not taught anything about Aboriginal history at school. I grew up believing that Tasmanian Aboriginals were extinct along with many other widely propagated myths about them. It was not until I started to educate myself through reading and listening that I discovered a terrible history that I knew nothing about. I felt the weight of injustice experienced by the Tasmanian Aboriginal Community, even today. I also felt more than a little peeved that I knew nothing of the ancient foundations of the land and waters that I call home.

Why is our church heading down the path of Aboriginal justice? Is it not just a distraction from the gospel? We are not unique in trying to find the right balance between social justice and evangelism, Christians have grappled with this balance for a long time and some have got it wrong. Done right though, seeking justice can be a powerful and tangible witness to the reconciling work of our God through Jesus. Aunty Jean Philips, one of Australia's most senior Aboriginal Christian Leaders declares that "it's only the cross – the Christian gospel – that will bring healing to our nation." I invite you to see the 'Big Picture' of what God is doing by stirring our hearts towards acknowledging and lamenting our shared past and seeking restored relationships with local Aboriginal people in Tasmania.

Week 1 Studies prepared by Bonnie Bonneville.

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## Day 1: A true fast

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### Read

Isaiah 58:1-5; Optional extra readings: Hosea 6:6, Matt 9:13, Luke 11:42, 1 Sam 15:22

"Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the descendants of Jacob their sins. For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them. 'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?' "Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?"

### Reflect

Lent is a traditional season of fasting. What does 'fasting' mean to you? Lenten fasts these days can involve anything from avoiding chocolate or coffee to giving up social media for the 40 days before Easter (excluding Sundays!). While these fasts can be a great way to put some distance between us and our modern-day vices and allow us more time or money to do good deeds, Isaiah 58:1-5 reminds us that these sacrifices in themselves are not what God requires for a true fast. In fact, these verses contain a harsh rebuke of the ancient Israelites about their nature of fasting. What were they doing wrong? What does this teach us about what is unacceptable to the God?

Isaiah 58:1-5 show us that the orientation of our hearts and our treatment of other people is more important to God than any of our religious observances and sacrifices. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' Matt 9:13a. True fasting is about intentionally clearing away all blockages and distractions and orientating our hearts towards God. By doing so, we understand His heart. His heart is for justice, for mercy and is full of love.

### Consider/Act

Consider the state of your heart. Is it orientated towards the Lord? What is blocking you or distracting you from hearing God clearly today?

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## Day 2: What does the Lord require of you?

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### Read

Isaiah 58:6-7; Optional extra readings: Micah 6:6-8

“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?”

### Reflect

Together in Song #618: “What does the Lord require of you? (x4), To seek justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with your God” is based on Micah 6:8. I enjoy humming the familiar tune that accompany the words to this verse. Do you? We used to sing it as a round in my family church when I was growing up. Those words and melody are etched in my mind. However, while these words are easy to sing, they are challenging to put into practice. What does it mean to act justly, to love mercy and walk humbly with God?

Isaiah 58:6-7 echoes Micah 6:6-8 about the nature of sacrifices that the Lord requires from His people. God has chosen a somewhat overwhelming list of social justice issues that He wants His people working towards as an outward expression of our devotion to Him. God asks us to stand up to injustice and oppression, to meet the needs of the hungry, the poor, the homeless and the wanderer, and at the same time, not to neglect caring for our own families.

### Consider/Act

Lent is a season of sacrifice and of giving our time and money to good causes. Consider what good deeds you could do this Lenten season. Pray. Ask God what he would like you to do.

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## Day 3: Here am I

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### Read

Isaiah 58:8-9a; Optional extra readings: Psalm 89:13-18

Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

### Reflect

We have over-simplified the gospel message. Modern Christians believe the gospel goes something along the lines of: "If you repent of your sins, put your trust in Jesus as your saviour, you will go to heaven when you die." This message is not wrong, it is just not the whole picture.

The gospel that Jesus taught was less about our future hope of heaven, and more about the arrival of the Kingdom of God on earth. The good news is that God has reconciled himself to the whole of His creation through the blood of Jesus. We are not saved out of creation, rather we are part of God's new creation if we are in Christ.

Christians are invited on mission with God to reconcile, transform and renew all of creation according to His Kingdom purposes. We do this through evangelism, engagement in the public square, working for peace and justice in the world and caring for all of God's creation.

### Consider/Act

Reflect on the extraordinary promises in Isaiah 58:8-9 for what happens when the Kingdom of God manifests on earth when we do what the Lord requires of us. What Kingdom work is God calling you to do?

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## Day 4: Let your light shine

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### Read

Isaiah 58:9b-11; Optional extra readings: Matt 5:13-16

"If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves on behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.

### Reflect

Take a moment to consider the unjust practices, the pointing fingers and the malicious talk that goes on in the media, our parliament, workplaces, playgrounds and in every sphere of our lives. Think of those people who are downtrodden, homeless, unemployed, and battling addictions. Consider how their lives are being impacted by the finger pointing, vitriol, indecision, blame games and infighting between those who have the power and means to make a difference.

As ordinary citizens we can feel powerless to effect change, however, that does not excuse us from our personal responsibilities to meet the needs of those around us and speak up against injustice. We are citizens of the Kingdom of God and co-heirs with Christ, with the promise of the Spirit to guide us, satisfy our needs, and strengthen us for the task. We can follow Jesus' example by loving and serving others, defending the weak against the strong, and upholding the cause of the poor and oppressed. ...let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven (Matt 5:16).

### Consider/Act

Where do you notice unfairness or a need within your sphere of influence? Pray. Ask God to work through you to address that unjust practice or fulfil that unmet need.

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## Day 5: Rebuild the ancient ruins

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### Read

Isaiah 58:12; Optional extra readings: Acts 17:24-28

Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.

### Reflect

Scientists have dated occupation by Aboriginal people on the lands and waters we now call Tasmania<sup>1</sup> to be over 40,000 years. The ancestors of Aboriginal Tasmanians were cut off from the Australian mainland by rising sea levels around 6,000 BC. They became an isolate population with a unique language and culture to mainland Aboriginal people. Before British colonisation of Tasmania, there were estimated between 3,000 to 15,000 Aboriginal Tasmanian people, self-named palawa.

Within the space of thirty years (1803-1835), British colonialists reduced their population to 200, through seizing their hunting grounds, depleting their food supply, kidnapping the women, massacring the men and by introducing diseases. The death of Truganini in 1876 gave rise to the widely propagated myth that the Palawa had become extinct. However, a remnant survived. In the 2016 census, 23,000 Tasmanians identify as Aboriginal people, with many still discovering their heritage.

Palawa are the ancient people appointed by God to be the custodians of these lands and waters we now call Tasmania.<sup>1</sup> British colonialism dispossessed the Palawa from their land, destroyed their communities and livelihoods and separated families and individuals from their culture. Sadly, the Anglican Church in Tasmania is complicit in these atrocities. We cannot change the past, but as God's people today, we can do our part to raise up Tasmania's age-old foundations.

### Consider/Act

What would it take for our church to be called the 'Repairer of Broken Walls', 'Restorer of Streets with Dwellings'?

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<sup>1</sup> This is adapted from the saying coined by Aboriginal Christian Leader, Brooke Prentis.

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## Day 6: Enter Sabbath Rest

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### Read

Isaiah 58:13-14; Optional extra readings: Matt 11:28-29; Hebrews 4:9-10

"If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the Lord's holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the Lord, and I will cause you to ride in triumph on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob." The mouth of the Lord has spoken.

### Reflect

Standing against injustice and oppression, meeting the needs of the hungry, the poor, the homeless and the wanderer, while caring for our own families, sounds overwhelming and exhausting. The final verses of Isaiah 58 beautifully remind us of our need to enter God's Sabbath rest through faithfully obeying and trusting in Him.

Sabbath is about finding rest and replenishment in God through trusting in His sovereignty through faithful obedience. Beginning with the creation story (Gen 1-2) and ending with a new creation (Rev 21-22), the Bible circles through this theme of searching for and finding God's rest (only to lose it again due to disobedience!). Sabbath rest is about God's people, in God's place, obeying God's commands. By doing so, one finds rest from sin and its curse, which is our goal and our purpose.

God promises those who follow His ways, who honour him, and who depend completely on Him, will find joy. They will also be promoted to positions of power and influence (ride in triumph on the heights of the land) and will inherit the authority of the Father (to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob) to create change in the world. We can do nothing in our own strength.

Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. (Matt 11:28-29 MSG)

### Consider/Act

Use your Lenten fast as an opportunity to enter God's rest.

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## Day 7: Our God of Justice

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### Read

Isaiah 58 (again in its entirety); Optional extra readings: Luke 4:18, Matt 25:34-35

### Reflect

Why is God so concerned about justice? Why is our treatment of other people so important to God? Why is seeking justice part of our Christian mandate and witness in the world?

Justice in its simplest form means to set things right. When we think about justice this way, we realise that justice has been the heart of God's earthly mission all along. God loves justice. God is just. When we pursue justice, we fully embrace the cause of Christ to set things right between us and God, and between us and each other. We extend the Kingdom of God on Earth.

Post-colonial Tasmania has a dark history towards Aboriginal people that needs to be set right. Intergenerational trauma, broken heartedness, and loss of culture manifests in Aboriginal communities today as disproportionately high rates of drug and alcohol abuse, suicide, domestic violence, incarceration, and poverty.

Isaiah 58 warns us against turning a blind eye to injustice. We cannot bring true worship to God while ignoring the cries of our Aboriginal brothers and sisters. Now is the time for Christians, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, to rise and journey together to rebuild Tasmania's age-old foundations and bring God's true healing and reconciliation into our state.

### Consider/Act

As you read this prophetic message from Isaiah, written 2,500 years ago, what does it teach you about the desires of God's heart? How is God leading you to worship Him today?