

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 3rd November 2019

2 Thessalonians 1: 1 – 4, 11 - 12; Isaiah 1: 10 - 18

“... awash with tears, aghast with anger, overwhelmed by the sheer force of its all-but-silent-scream...” That is what the then Guardian newspaper's film reviewer, Mark Kermode, felt after seeing the film maker Ken Loach's last film *I, Daniel Blake*.¹

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The film *I, Daniel Blake*, which was released in 2016 took an unflinching look at lives lived in Britain by people who are trying to survive on social welfare payments and who are trying to negotiate the system by which they receive those payments that keep them alive,

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The film maker Ken Loach has always made films that tackle difficult political or social issues such as, drug addiction, poverty, homelessness, war, belonging, immigration, release from prison, love. His latest film, in the cinemas now, is called *Sorry We Missed You*, and once again it tackles a difficult political and social problem, low-paid, zero hours contract work, such as the jobs delivery drivers do, who arrive daily at our doors delivering the parcels of things that we have bought online.

Writing in the Financial Times, the reviewer Raphael Abrahams said,

*In the end-credits Loach gives thanks to those drivers whose testimony informed the film but who wished to remain anonymous. He is their much-needed voice and remains that of our moral conscience.*²

Ken Loach has made over 27 such films for the cinema alone – he is eighty-three years old – and he is able to continue working and making these commercially popular, but socially and politically challenging films because he is not a politician or a social worker, but a film maker.

He takes the medium of entertainment and uses it to make a broader point about the society we live in. His films are not just conscience-pricking or worthy, they are also always funny, beautiful, moving, clever, wonderfully acted, filmed and directed mainstream movies.

Ken Loach uses the medium of entertainment to make a point. He takes events that should be sensational and shocking to his viewers, and he portrays them on the screen as they are in the real world, part of the normal, everyday, lives of real people.

When we read the Bible, in particular such passages as we read this morning from the prophet Isaiah, it wouldn't be too much to say that if Isaiah was a prophet for his people in his time, then Ken Loach is a prophet for us in our time.

The prophet Isaiah was not afraid to criticise the political leadership and the social elite of his country - one of the Jewish states of his day, Judah. He compared the rulers and people of Judah to those who lived and ruled the inhospitable cities of biblical Sodom and Gomorrah.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/oct/23/i-daniel-blake-ken-loach-review-mark-kermode>

² <https://www.ft.com/content/1ba039f0-7893-11e9-be7d-6d846537acab>

Here the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom; attend, you people of Gomorrah, to the instruction of our God: ... There is blood on your hands; wash yourselves and be clean. Put away the evil of your deeds, away out of my sight. Cease to do evil and learn to do right, pursue justice and champion the oppressed; give the orphan his rights, plead the widow's cause.³

What made Isaiah so upset with the people of Judah was the way they treated their religious worship, sacrifices and festivals,

Your countless sacrifices, what are they to me? ... New moons and Sabbaths and assemblies, sacred seasons and ceremonies I cannot endure. I cannot tolerate your new moons and your festivals. When you lift up your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you.⁴

Why was God, through the voice of Isaiah, so angry about the way the people of Judah went about celebrating these worship sacrifices, ceremonies, festivals, and sacred seasons? Were these things not an expression of devotion to God, an opportunity for the community to come together to worship, to remember the past, to celebrate the present and to look to the future?

They were, but what had happened, I think, to these ceremonies, festivals, and sacred seasons is that they had become ends in themselves. They had become opportunities for entertainment and spectacle. The sacrifices that lay at the hearts of them, for example, had become sensationalised, "I am sated with whole-offerings of rams and the fat of buffaloes; I have no desire for the blood of bulls, of sheep, of he-goats."⁵

If you had been present when all these rams and buffaloes and bulls and sheep and he-goats were being sacrificed during these ceremonies, festivals and sacred seasons, it would have been quite a spectacle, something sensational; no doubt very entertaining. So much so, that I wonder if this sensation, spectacle and entertainment had not become the reason people participated in these festivals, and the political and social message that they were meant to contain, which concerned the nature of justice and the treatment of people like orphans and widows, had been forgotten or was drowned out by everything else that was going on.

These words of Isaiah's drawing attention to the way the people of Judah had taken their eyes off the ball, which we heard spoken in our church this morning, are not just words that needed to be heard in a far-off country two and a half thousand years ago, they are words that we need to hear today.

We in St. Ninian's, in the Church of Scotland, in Britain are entering upon a time of year full of ceremonies, festivals and sacred seasons, as we do every year. At the beginning of October, we celebrated Harvest; last week was Halloween; next Sunday is Remembrance; Advent and Christmas are just around the corner - ceremonies, festivals and sacred seasons.

It is too easy for us, as we mark these every year, to see them as, or to reduce them to, spectacles of sensation or opportunities for entertainment, and in so doing to miss the important messages that they contain and are meant to convey: how do we grow and share food in a world that is facing unprecedented climate change, for example; at Halloween, do we remember to honour those who went before us and who built our world and our faith; what should our attitude to conflict be when it is not us who will die fighting, but our children or grandchildren; it is lovely to see a happy family, in a warm stable, filled with the joy of cradling a new-born, but how does vulnerability save us from ourselves – and at what cost?

³ Isaiah 1: 10, 15c, - 17

⁴ Isaiah 1: 11, 13 – 14a

⁵ Isaiah 1: 11b

At Easter, another of our festivals, the resurrection – a dead man who appears to be alive – is often sensationalised, but what does that story have to tell us about our attitude to the lives we lead and our deaths?

These ceremonies, festivals and sacred seasons are not meant to be there just to entertain or amaze, they hold within them our understanding of ourselves, the lives we lead, and the societies we have built.

That's not to say they can't be beautiful, moving, funny, clever, wonderfully choreographed, directed and performed. It is just that when we take the meaning that is contained in them and make that meaning into something entertaining or sensational, then we will find that Ken Loach, Isaiah and God will have something to say to us.

Christmas is not about a baby being born. Easter is not about a dead person coming back to life. The festival of All Saints at Halloween isn't about scaring people. Remembrance Sunday isn't about a war that happened over a hundred years ago. Harvest isn't about fields of ripe wheat in need of ploughing.

There is no better time than now to open the book of Isaiah, to watch the films of Ken Loach, or to listen to the words of God. Not just because we are in a time of year filled with sacred seasons and festivals, but because it turns out that this seasonal year will also be a time of campaigning, electioneering and voting. We have an important decision to make in December.

Over the coming weeks we will see this important decision played out before us on our TVs, radios, computers, phones, doorsteps and through our letter boxes. More and more, in our time as in Isaiah's, the media and the political machinery that competes for our attention and our votes through that media, reduces our politics and our social issues to a form of entertainment to be laughed at or mocked, or it twists the events that underlie our politics into a sensation, a spectacle to be amazed at or shocked by.

Of course, much like Ken Loach engages his viewers by not removing the beauty, fun, wit, wonder, and performance in his films, we need also to be able to find our seasons and festivals engaging and delightful. We are more likely, too, to switch on to a political debate if it has a bit of drama and intrigue to it.

But, the coming weeks of campaigning before the General Election are not about the drama and intrigue, nor are they meant to be opportunities for entertainment. They are about something else, and if you want to know what they are about then over the coming weeks you could go to the cinema and allow Ken Loach to move you and inform you.

And you could listen to the words of Isaiah; we'll hear more from him in the coming weeks as we celebrate our sacred seasons. "Come now," he says this morning, "let us argue it out ... Though your sins are scarlet, they may become white as snow; though they are dyed crimson, they may yet be like wool."

From now until Christmas this is our opportunity to reconnect with what matters in our society, what is important in our lives, what will make a difference to our politics, and what is transformational in our world.