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Week 2: Reflection 2: Isaiah 1.10, 16-20

The tiny pinpoint holes peppered the man's worn-out work clothes which had been repeatedly formed by the tiny sparks from the welder's torch. Beneath the clothes his skin mirrored similarly shaped scars, burned into his body as proof of the life he now lived. While it was better than the one he had in the West Indies, it was indeed, so much less than the one he had desired.

All of his life, he had dreamed of becoming a businessman – having a small shop, or working even in finance. But, he understood life didn't always give individuals like him an opportunity to pursue their dreams. So, it was good to have an alternate plan – just in case. Also, he realised that necessity could intervene – wife, children, family back home – all looking to him for support. So, sacrifice was needed today, for opportunities that he hoped for tomorrow.

His mind had forced him long ago to accept the reality that his dream would remain unfulfilled, his true passions and gifts would go unrealised, unused, unwanted. Yet, his faith in God remained steadfast – it was an important part of his upbringing – God first, family second – because the latter could not succeed or survive without the former.

But, this was his life now in a wealthy western country where promises of plenty, success, and the achievement of dreams were (in reality) available only to a few. And, the smooth blue-black hue of his skin and loosely coiled hair, ensured he would never be amongst them.

He had been born in the warm waters under sun drenched skies in the British West Indies. As a child, the island of St Thomas was seen through the eyes of its tourists who came to sample the warmth, white beaches, turquoise waters and service they received from islanders. They were accepting, kind, well-mannered, and openly invited islanders to visit their country where workers were needed and welcomed. This seemed an exciting prospect, as the island impoverished, offering mainly domestic work, with limited opportunities for skilled trade or business. So, free passage to this 'land of plenty' had come as unpaid indentured servitude. Yet, God was with him, as the master tradesman who sponsored him was also Christian, and offered to include his transportation and living costs into his 10 years apprenticeship to help run his two shops in small town upstate New York.

Unlike others indentured, he was fortunate. A common practice had become to increase the work indebtedness of servants, by selling their apprenticeships on to another trade master as soon their original agreement neared completion. In this way, a master tradesman could serve as a broker, receive a financial percentage of the new contract in addition to the compensation arranged for the one or two years being sold on to the new tradesman. In reality, indentured servants found the remaining unpaid work on their contracts, had been extended to include an additional five or ten years. The result? Indentured servitude now represented another form of slavery, framed by an unjust system, designed to generate a life-long, free work-force during the 1800s.

Yet, God had protected him. While working, he had obtained schooling, learnt to read and write, and calculate numbers – a skill where his mental acuity excelled. As a Black man his options for securing financial support to start a business was limited. So, planned to earn his trade licence, and use his financial skills to land a small job in a bank. Like his apprenticeship, he would work hard, develop relationships in the banking community – then apply for a small personal loan to start his business, and use his savings to live on until the business grew.

Looking back, he recalled his first interview after completing his apprenticeship. The hand written commendation from his white trade master (a respectable, well-known community leader) had given him hope in finding an entry-level bank job. After all, the trade master's recommendation spoke highly of his financial skills maintaining accounts, billings, and financially managing two welding shops. Both shops had prospered, even expanded under the apprentice's skills. In the end, the personal reference bore little weight.

Even the man's education, experience, and reliable work ethic had no influence. Without banking capital, the man knew he would never own a business. The solution the bank manager offered after reviewing his job application was this: "You people have to start accepting your place in the world – and not be too 'high-stepping'. You have a good trade skill, so be content as a welder. Who knows, you might find work with our local rail company repairing tracks, and in time have an opportunity to be a baggage handler, a porter or even a dining car waiter inside the train."

But, the Black man knew working for a rail company would never provide the needed capital. The manager's next statement was even more hurtful when he said, "You see, we simply don't have that many 'negro' customers for us to hire you. Our customers wouldn't know how to act or accept a 'coloured' person taking their cash deposits, counting out their money, or managing their accounts. And, we'd have to consider having someone monitor you – to ensure nothing goes missing. Perhaps if you looked a little more like... well...like those mulattos or mixed bloods, we could give you a uniform and have you open the door for our customers."

The bank manager's end words went unheard as the man's face hid his disappointment, for he realised his application was being rejected because of his skin colour. He smiled and responded, "Well Sir, it's a bit too late for God to change his mind about my skin colour. But thank you for meeting with me."

Other interviews followed. Some was cancelled immediately as he entered the bank. Other managers told him the position had been filled, albeit the 'help wanted' sign remained in the building window weeks after his interview. This was his life in the west, in one of the richest countries in the world, where promises of plenty, success, and achievement were available, but only to a few.

The financial security and independence the man envisioned remained a dream – the hue of his skin had made it impossible. So, he found joy in his faith, in hope – in his confident expectation – that one day life would be different for his children. Unbeknownst to the man, his dream would take just over 180 years to be fulfilled.

In Isaiah's prophecy God charges his people 'to learn to do good and seek justice'. He is calling his people to habitually practice equity towards all people – without qualifiers! His instructions do not offer 'exclusion' clauses to justify our discriminatory behaviour – 'if the person is this' or 'if the individual looks like that'. Instead, God's loving outreach to His people pleads for justice to apply to all without favouritism or prejudice.

After all, if we love God and serve to please Him – we will follow His Word. Often we look at our churches and communities with myopic vision – seeing only what's, rather than it's potential. It's easy to be too busy

to ask questions like, 'Who is not here? Does our church represent all people in or parish? If not, 'Why is that?' Further, as we look around we must discern with God's eyes, and ask: 'Who plays a role in leading our worship? Working in our Church Office? Serving on our PCC or Synod? Greeting those who come through our doors? Or, serving as Treasurer?'

When the Lord makes His final pronouncement, "I have spoken", we know that action of some form must follow – either action by God, or the people who serve Him. God challenges us daily to hear His call compelling us to do better, be better, and make this incredible world that He has given us all –better for everyone.

Each of us plays an important role in whether the dreams, gifts, and talents of those around us, especially those who have experienced injustice or viewed as 'other' – are realised and appreciated. In this way we move towards making our churches, communities, parishes and country a better place for all, and not simply a few.

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

