

## Sermon

*Isaiah condemns those overzealous in their faith more sternly than those consumed with doubt. Faith without doubt is not faith at all, but a pretended knowledge that leads to self-righteousness.*

## THE NEXUS OF FAITH & DOUBT

By Dean L. May

I SPEAK NOT AS A STUDENT OF BIBLICAL TEXTS, NOR as one trained at theological school in the art of preparing sermons. I have, however, listened during the course of my fifty-five years of mortality to a good many exhortations at Sunday meetings. In fact, allowing a year off for various illnesses and occasional obstinate absences, I have been at least physically present during some 5,687 sermons, including 653 by members of stake high councils. So I would not consider myself inexperienced or at least unexposed to sermonizing. And my character contains, I fear, a tediously didactic streak, perhaps a genetic defect, which prompts me to draw object lessons from almost everything that happens in my life, and thus makes me adept at some aspects of the sermonizing process.

It may be my experience with all those sermons, including my own ad hoc ones, that makes me feel their efficacy is overrated. My life has been buffeted and changed for good or ill by lots of experiences, but rarely by sermons. Moreover, I am a Latter-day Saint—a believing and practicing member of a faith that has always specialized in offering humankind more a practicum than a lecture course in right living. The sermons in my faith provide a setting and forum for getting together and interacting as people trying to understand and do God's will, but the sermons are not the principal agents of either that understanding or those deeds. I find this skeptical view of the value of sermons liberating, for what I may say will, I suspect, little change either the views or conduct of anyone in an appreciable or lasting way. Still, hope springs eternal, and I cannot quite get it out of my head that Lincoln committed perhaps his worst error of judgment when he said, in the Gettysburg Address, "The world will little note nor long remember what we say here."

DEAN L. MAY is a professor of history at the University of Utah. This article was originally given as a sermon at the 1993 Sunstone Symposium in Salt Lake City.

### ISAIAH'S CONDEMNATION OF ISRAEL

*Two classes of sinners: the doubt-driven and the self-righteous.*

MY text is from Isaiah 5, which I read as a prophecy pertinent to our time. The chapter begins with Jehovah, the Lord of Hosts, expressing his love towards Israel: "Now will I sing to my well beloved a song of my beloved touching his vineyard." Yet the tone changes abruptly in verse 8 to a litany of maledictions against the Israelites. They overdevelop the land: "Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field, till there be no place, that they may be placed alone in the midst of the earth!" They indulge in revelry: "Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink. . . . They regard not the work of the Lord, neither consider the operation of his hands." (v. 11–12.) Their errors become so great that hell opens itself to receive them.

Then Jehovah is enthroned in power and righteousness and the text returns briefly to themes of renewal and solace. "Young rams shall feed where fat bullocks once pastured, and kids shall graze broad acres where cattle grew fat."<sup>1</sup> There follows a new set of indictments.

Woe unto them that draw iniquity with cords of vanity, and sin as it were with a cart rope: That say, Let him make speed, and hasten his work, that we may see it: and let the counsel of the Holy One of Israel draw nigh and come, that we may know it! Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter! Woe unto them that are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight! (vv. 18–21.)

This class of sinners also have their reward, perhaps worse than being drawn into hell. "Therefore as the fire devoureth the stubble, and the flame consumeth the chaff, so their root shall be

as rottenness, and their blossom shall go up as dust." (v. 24.) Yet, in spite of his wrath and anger, the Lord holds up an ensign, expedites the gathering of the faithful unto it, from whence they look back upon a world of suffering and gloom: "if one look unto the land, behold darkness and sorrow, and the light is darkened in the heavens thereof." (v. 30.)

The prophecy applies to our time and distinguishes between two classes of sinners. Who are the sinners of the first order? Those who build lavish houses that fill the land, who revel from morning to night with wine and music; those who "regard not the work of the Lord, neither consider the operation of his hands." They are, simply put, persons whose doubts have driven them from the vineyard of the Lord into pride and self-sufficiency.

Who is there among us that might merit such an indictment? I suspect we all know a few, and many of us might find the finger pointing in our direction. Some have simply turned from spiritual matters to the unalloyed pursuit of material and physical pleasure. A friend, a wealthy attorney, told me of the joy he had found in his new faith. His pastor was not judgmental, and the choir, paid and trained professionals, sang Bach and Beethoven far better than our admittedly rustic and sporadically active ward organization.

Others have naively chosen to build upon the understanding offered by scholars—sociologists, political scientists, psychologists, poststructuralists, even historians—and to put their trust in human reason and understanding. I say "naively" because the most superficial reading into the history of these and other academic persuasions makes it clear that they are always in flux, that a fair part of today's sure answers will be tomor-



## Isaiah 5:20

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row's heresies. To build upon such foundations is surely to court disaster when the storms come. This brew of excessive spiritual doubt and overweening human pride is seductive and potent. It is hard to resist, and readily inflames those who drink deeply of it.

And what is their reward? Isaiah says they are to be humbled—to be bereft of their possessions and comforts, brought down to witness and finally acknowledge the triumph of the Lord. "Hell hath enlarged herself, and opened her mouth without measure: and their glory, and their multitude, and their pomp . . . shall descend into it." (v. 14.) Theirs is certainly an uncomfortable fate, but not an absolute one. Indeed, their humiliation and God's triumph are followed by the pastoral image of lambs and kids grazing in broad pastures.

Who are the second class of sinners? Their vice is quite the opposite from those of the first group. They say, "Let him make speed, and hasten his work, that we may see it: and let the counsel of the Holy One of Israel draw nigh and come, that we may know it!" (v. 19.) In their imagined righteousness and spiritual understanding they urge the Lord to hasten his work. They are, of the two groups of sinners, most prone to confuse good and evil, to be wise in their own eyes and prudent in their own sight. It is they who tolerate wickedness if it serves their purpose and deny the righteousness of good people.

Such people don't have problems with excessive doubt; it is their *faith* that is excessive, leading them to self-righteousness, intolerance of others, and to a naive expectation that they alone will survive the day of the Lord. Hence, they urge his coming and beg his counsel

without exercising their own understanding or judgment. We all know a few of these as well.

A couple I know persisted against all counsel in having more and more children when clearly the mother's life was increasingly endangered by each pregnancy. That was, of course, their decision, though I might have thought they were confusing good and evil. Another brother told me one time that God was preparing the world for the Second Coming spiritually through the gospel and temporally through Amway—again, to my mind, an example of calling evil good and good evil. There are others who seem prone to such weaknesses, some exercising power and authority in the Church and in the world, and yet showing little compassion for those along the roadside who have fallen among thieves.

#### THE CONNECTEDNESS OF DOUBT & FAITH

*Faith without doubt is dead.*

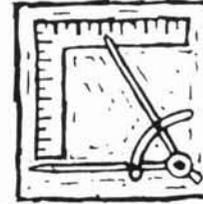
**I**SAIAH, in short, condemns those overzealous in their faith more sternly than those consumed by doubt. To the latter he offers, after humbling, reconciliation and broad pastures; to the former he offers a consuming fire.

Both are condemned partly because of their excessive zeal. But there may also be another grievous fault in them. Each group imagines themselves whole without the other. They fail to understand that there is a necessary nexus between faith and doubt. As every Latter-day Saint knows, to have faith is to believe in things that are not seen. The fact that they cannot be seen, that is, cannot be verified through some empirical means, is the very condition that transforms them from mere knowledge into a principle of action, into faith. Faith without doubt is dead. It is not faith at all, but a pretended knowledge that leads naturally to the conceit of self-righteousness and the whole chain of evils that follow, as described by Isaiah. I quail when I hear people say that they "know beyond a shadow of a doubt" that the gospel is true. Mere knowledge, as the world understands it, seems a frail foundation upon which to build a humane and compassionate life. I know a good many highly knowledgeable people who seem almost devoid of ethical values.

Their lives evidence that doubt without faith is no more wholesome than faith without doubt. Isaiah quite rightly associates such people with pride and self-indulgence. We of the intellectual bent must ever be on guard to temper our doubt with the humbling admission that we do not have all the answers. And we of faith must ever be alert to the danger of imagining our faith to be certain knowledge and thus compromising its power as faith, and arrogating to ourselves a moral superiority we do not possess. There is much power in the plea of the man who desperately hoped Jesus could cast out the evil spirit from his son. "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief." (Mark 9:24.) Let us flee the doubting arrogance of regarding not the work of the Lord, or not considering the operation of his hands; but let us also flee the spiritual pride that makes us wise in our own eyes and prudent in our own sight. Only when doubt is joined to faith will we come with speed swiftly to the ensign of the Lord. ☐

#### NOTE

1. Isa. 5:17. This text is from the New English Bible and seems to me clearer (and more supportive of my exegesis) than that of the King James Bible, which I cite elsewhere in this sermon.



#### SUNDAY IN ST. AUGUSTINE

... for if the generous ideas of youth are too often overclouded by the sordid views of afterlife, that scarcely proves them to be false.

—Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

Spirals of gulls float down on me  
and swing sharply across  
the listless Matanzas River  
which dumps here its mussel-shoaled scars,  
its gathered density.  
My back scrapes a rib  
of *el Castillo de San Marcos*  
that hugs the old turn of water.  
I concentrate on thinness,  
gleaming moments  
of sun penetrating sea currents,  
winter breathing;  
each novel page accrues  
wedgelike, when pressed tightly.  
Clouds amass accusing gray:  
what clusters in a moment must dissolve.  
Two squat hills away, tuxedoed men  
swat croquet into gusts that lift their tails,  
exploding scarlet underneath like a scandal.  
A black-clad woman stands her ground,  
voile and fur draped on a statue  
but for her sure step  
which means for me all confidence:  
one of the foppish pair will kiss her  
and I root for her, for that moment, until I grow cold  
and unimaginative, and hungry,  
so I decide: I can't see her face—what if she's old?

—KARL ROSENQUIST