

## Liberation for the Oppressed

 *Isaiah 58:3–10*

Christians are currently in the season of Lent, a time when they reflect more deeply than usual on the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus. Some also practise fasting in order to align their hearts with Him. In Old Testament times, there were also people who earnestly sought God and willingly undertook fasting and ascetic practices. Yet there were also those who complained that, despite their efforts, God did not hear their prayers: *“Why have we fasted, and you do not see it...?”* (v.3).

The prophet Isaiah responds sharply in the latter half of verse 3 through verse 5: *“Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day... you oppress all your workers... you fast only to quarrel and to fight... and to strike with a wicked fist.”* Those who voiced complaints were fasting, yet at the same time they stirred up “strife and contention”, oppressed their slaves, and shattered peace. This was not the kind of fasting that God desired. They treated the weak like beasts burdened with a yoke. Yet God desired the liberation of those forced to submit to the powerful. God seeks fasting that shows care for people without homes, food or clothing. After the Israelites were

liberated from Babylon, a stark gap between the rich and poor emerged in Jewish society. In an age when even the hardship of fasting had fallen into empty formalism, Isaiah spoke out. Without fearing the rulers, he sternly denounced them. In this sense, he was a prophet who anticipated the coming of Christ some five hundred years later.

The situation within our own country is also severe for socially vulnerable people (those facing economic hardship, foreigners, and others). When we turn our eyes to the world, wars are spreading across many regions. In the wars of recent years, great powers have driven smaller nations into ever more difficult positions. Far from loosening the bonds of oppression, the great powers have tightened them tenfold, twentyfold. As a defeated nation in the Pacific War and the sole country to suffer atomic bombing, yet possessing a proud and peaceful constitution, our nation must advocate to the world for " the liberation of the oppressed."