

Treasure in Heaven ...

... discovering the truth about ourselves

The sermon given at the Ash Wednesday Choral Communion Service by the Vicar, the Revd. Canon Jonathan Baker, on 26th February 2020, in Beverley Minster.

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Matthew 8:16-21

In the beginning of the Bible, when Adam and Eve disobey God and eat the fruit from the forbidden tree, we're told that almost the first thing they do is that the man and his wife 'hid themselves' from the presence of the Lord God. And it seems to me that that's the first and deepest effect of sin in the human condition. The reality of sin means that we all of us have a deeply ingrained desire to hide from the truth: which means hiding from God because he is the God who 'is' truth; hiding from our neighbour; and hiding even from ourselves. Or you could put it in reverse order: that because we cannot face the truth about ourselves, therefore that distorts our relationships with the God of truth and with our neighbour. But either way, our human tendency is to want to put on a 'front' - there's a widening gap between image and reality. We see it these days, especially in all the concern about social media, perhaps especially affecting young people and the way there's such a pressure to present a perfectly curated image to the world - one hears stories of people spending hours, putting on their makeup and making themselves look beautiful in order to take a selfie of themselves eating breakfast, in order to post it online and show what a perfect life they live.

And of course, other people see that and then feel intimidated and empty because they're not able - they know that the reality in their own lives is very different. But it's not just young people - I'm conscious of doing it myself: if you come into the vicarage living room, you'll see a very carefully curated set of bookshelves, that will give you the impression of what a wonderfully cultured vicar you have; all the racks of Agatha Christie and Dick Francis and John Grisham are carefully hidden away upstairs.

There is this desire to hide from the truth about ourselves. And it includes the spiritual life. Our reading from Matthew's Gospel speaks of people giving alms,

praying and fasting, which of course are all good things to do: they're important spiritual disciplines. But Jesus is warning that it's so easy for them to become instruments of deceit. And he warns against making a song and dance about almsgiving and against praying in public, or making acts of self-discipline obvious to others. Because the purpose of these disciplines is to cultivate healthy life-giving habits that can shape the kind of people we become. But in each example Jesus mentions, the discipline is in danger of being curated: it's being presented by some people not for any benefit it may have of itself, but in order to make an impression on other people, to make the individuals concerned seem more generous, more spiritual, more penitential than they really are.

And why should that affect us? Why should we worry about these appearances? Does it matter what other people think? Well, I think, Jesus's concern is not so much about deceiving other people, as about deceiving ourselves. Deep down, I want to believe I'm a better person than I really am, but it's easier for me to carry off that belief (that I am a better person than I really am), if I can persuade other people to believe I'm a good person, because if other people believe it about me, then it must be true, mustn't it?

It's all an elaborate exercise in concealing the truth from ourselves: the human heart, it seems, is inherently deceitful and we should be constantly suspicious of our own motives. Maybe that's the reason why many of us find it so difficult to spend time on our own in silence: it's because in those conditions, it's harder to hide from the truth about ourselves; we're freed up from the distractions and the opportunity to put on a front.

That's why the penitential seasons of Lent and Advent have traditionally been seen as times of reflection and introspection; times of withdrawing into the wilderness to be alone with the Lord where the devil can be identified more clearly and resisted, and we can stop hiding from ourselves. And I commend to you the 'Quiet Day' on Saturday morning, coming up, which Maggie Jeavons will be leading, which will be a great opportunity to get ourselves into that reflective mood for Lent, to find some space to confront some of the truth about ourselves.

Three times Jesus urges his disciples to carry out their spiritual disciplines in secret, in private, where no one but God can see. "Do it in secret," he says, "and your father,

who sees in secret, will reward you." And so it seems we discern the truth about ourselves, not when we're we are entirely alone, but when we place ourselves simply in the presence of another, and ultimately in the presence of God Himself. And in the history of the church, there has been this strong sense that it is easiest for us to confront the truth about ourselves when we share our deepest shortcomings with somebody else: with a trusted friend; the spouse or partner; with a spiritual director; or a retreat guide. One of the cornerstones of the monastic movement, is a community where people are are expected to acknowledge their failings before one another, knowing that the other is committed to them and isn't going to think any the less of them because of it.

And we long for the church to be that community where people can be honest about themselves - where the temptation to put on a front, to put on an act, is reduced and where we can be ourselves more truly. And Jesus says when we do that, your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

That reward doesn't need to be seen as a promise of heaven in the future - I think it's more likely to be the reward of discovering more of the truth about ourselves, becoming more self-aware, growing in integrity and wholeness, and in the process, laying up treasure in heaven rather than in the shifting and unreliable court of other people's opinions.

Reading Texts

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

¹Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near— ²a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness spread upon the mountains a great and powerful army comes; their like has never been from of old, nor will be again after them in ages to come.

¹²Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; ¹³rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing. ¹⁴Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord, your God? ¹⁵Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; ¹⁶gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her canopy. ¹⁷Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep. Let them say, "Spare your people, O Lord, and do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations. Why should it be said among the peoples, "Where is their God?' "

Matthew 6:16-21

¹⁶"And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ¹⁹"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.