

Ash Wednesday, Mar 5th 2014

Readings: Isaiah 58:1-12 2 Cor 5:20b-6.10 Matt 6:1-6, 16-21

On the front of our service sheets tonight, there is a very helpful explanation about Lent and Ash Wednesday (I'd encourage you to read it, if you haven't already); and also, in the March edition of our magazine, Jeremy's introduction is all about Lent.

We are here to mark the season of forty days
that comes before Easter.

This mirrors the forty days that Jesus spent in the wilderness, fasting and praying,
after his baptism and before the start of his ministry.

Key words that are associated with Lent include:

- Self examination,
- self denial,
- study,
- almsgiving – which means giving clothing,
 food or money to the poor –
- and penitence.

Penitence is the act of saying sorry, of repenting,
and is historically associated in Lent with prayer,
fasting and the use of ash.

Our Old Testament and Gospel readings this evening
were about how to show what we believe through our actions –
in particular, three actions that are standard obligations of Jewish people:
almsgiving, praying and fasting.

Isaiah describes a situation in which fasting seems to have become a battle-ground between two groups of people trying to be righteous.

One group seems to have been fasting simply for the sake of it, for reasons other than penitence.
They are criticised for fasting, yet not seeing the needs of those less well off around them.

Isaiah suggests that God will not be impressed if they fast but don't share their bread with the hungry, or bring the homeless poor into their houses.

It's a theme that runs through some other of the prophetic books of the Old Testament (like Zechariah, Joel and Ezra) – that religious practice is useless without the social justice.

In Matthew's gospel Jesus also talks about our reasons for being righteous.

He warns his disciples, in verse 1 of chapter 6,

"Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven."

The word for 'piety' is one that also means 'covenant behaviour' – that is, the sort of behaviour that is needed to respect and strengthen our relationship with God.

Jesus is concerned that his disciples showed their beliefs

in an appropriate way;

that their actions should really express

the state of their relationship with God;

and more than that –

they should only be concerned with what God thinks,

not what others think.

Flamboyantly going around flaunting their acts of giving to the poor, or praying, or fasting is doing it for an audience, not for their relationship with God.

It would be better if those things are done secretly – for then, they are done for the right reason, pleasing God instead of showing off in front of others.

By doing it secretly, they would be

“storing up for themselves treasures in heaven;

for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (v.20-21)

In other words, God would be pleased and reward them for doing so –

not with earthly treasure, but treasure in heaven –

knowing his love more and strengthening their relationship with him.

And it's the same for us.

Take a moment to think about all the practical ways in which you demonstrate your faith in God.

They might be:

Coming to church

Giving your time voluntarily to help others

Taking clothes or other stuff to a charity shop

Praying for other people you know who need your prayers

Giving some of your money away

Visiting a neighbour who is housebound

Trying to keep the peace amongst your friends

Always trying to tell the truth

Fasting...

.....and more....

Jesus' advice to his disciples is to match our outward appearance with the inner reality.

So, if we give stuff away – how do we do it?

We may feel good about it, and make it really obvious to other people what we're doing.

But what does that look like? Self-importance, smugness, maybe looking a bit 'holier-than-thou'...

Jesus suggests we don't tell anyone.

Only God will know. And he will reward us.

And when we pray, do we love showing other people how eloquent and clever we are with words?

Do we like using religious phrases, because they sound as though we know what we're talking about?

Jesus suggests we go into a room by ourselves and talk with God – then we will be ourselves, not performing in front of other people.

And why not use the Lord's Prayer as a useful framework for our prayer? It's what Jesus is about to recommend to his disciples in this passage from Matthew.

And then, what about fasting?

In Jesus' day, and in Old Testament times,

it was obvious when someone was fasting.

They used to dress in sack-cloth, let themselves go a bit, and smear their face with ashes.

Possibly an equivalent behaviour today would be fasting for the purpose of improving your health –

something which is quite popular in today's culture – and letting other people know what you're doing and why.

Jesus suggests that instead, we look normal, brush our hair, wash, dress as usual; and no-one will know we're fasting, except God. And he's the only person who needs to know.

Of course, Jesus' advice can be applied to any religious behaviour, not just these three. Anything we do in response to God's love for us can become something which pampers our own ego, when other people know about it.

So when we:

Come to church, or
Volunteer, or
Give stuff away, or
Pray for other people, or
Visit a neighbour, or
Keep the peace amongst friends, or
Tell the truth, or
Fast...or anything else,

We do these things in front of God alone.
Nobody else needs to know.
And our Father, who sees in secret, will reward us.

Jesus doesn't say what the reward will be –
possibly, that is part of the point, too.
But we will know the presence and love of God.
And we will be 'doing business with God'
away from the limelight of the gaze of others.

Lent is a good time to look at ourselves in the cold light of day, honestly and humbly.
What do we need to change, in our religious behaviour or attitude?
Perhaps we could make resolution – like at New Year one, but one for Lent –
to promise God that we will examine ourselves and say sorry;
after this sermon is the liturgy of penitance,
which will help us do this.

We can say sorry for being selfish and wanting other's approval;
And we can ask for God's help in making sure our actions are done for the right reasons.
We can ask Him to make our hearts clean,
And to renew a right spirit within us.

Amen.