

Matthew 6.1-6, 16-21; Joel 2.1-2, 12-17; 2 Cor. 5.20b - 6.10
Service for Ash Wednesday: to mark the Beginning of Lent
17th February 2021- From the Vicarage

You know, in a world where truth is increasingly marginalised, in a culture that is ceasing to focus on truth above all other concerns, we see the rise of self-serving ideologues behaving with increasing insanity and silliness.

The great questions of our destiny and of what it means to be human are set aside, either by relativists who believe that ‘my truth is the only one that matters’, or by fundamentalists who want to inflict ‘their truth’ on everyone else. There are no absolutes, or rather, they become increasingly difficult to find, because the relativists and the fundamentalists cast them aside as being of no value.

The Sermon on the Mount occupies three whole chapters of Matthew’s gospel, chs. 5, 6 & 7 – and it’s all about discipleship, so we can be sure this is a central theme of Jesus’ teaching, the spirituality of religious practices. How can we be faithful and effective followers of our leader of the Christian faith, full of integrity and truth?

We’re first told about how *not* to pray, indeed how *not* to be religious. Our pieties, that is, our beliefs which we accept with an unthinking conventional reverence, may have an element of dutifulness to them. They may not be a true reflection of ourselves before God. They may be done for show, and thereby become disfigured.

The word, ‘hypocritical’, stemming from the Greek, *hypokrasis*, means just that, to act a part on stage. People who do this are looking for a reward, the applause and respect of others. If this is their motivation for praying, then they will probably get that reward, but they won’t develop a good relationship with God, who sees into hearts and minds.

The rewards of a strong relationship with God, in all humility, honesty and love, is never ‘a done deal’, a status quo that can be attained by good works. Our intimacy with God is like a spiritual furnace, where we are constantly being refined into truth, and forged into something better and finer for the betterment of all, and not just ourselves.

But we aren’t perfect – no-one is. We may fall occasionally, we will fail occasionally, but we can always pick ourselves up, dust ourselves down, and have another go. A common mistake is to ever think of ourselves as unworthy and somehow disqualified. God never closes the door on us. In repentance we can turn to God at any time, whatever we’ve done.

Earthy treasures are always apt to fail – they flicker out like dodgy bulbs, *says the priest academic, Jeff Astley*. The type of treasure we accumulate is a reliable indication of what we value, *says the NT scholar, Craig Evans*. We must learn to look beyond all these good, valuable things and loves, and even beyond ourselves, and be ever vigilant for the stuff that truly lasts.

To see the kingdom and righteousness of God, we must be able to glimpse – in and through beyond them all – the one true absolute: the infinite, the eternal, the Giver who transcends all gifts, and the love that exceeds all loving. Amen.

Matthew 6.1-6, 16-21 Concerning Almsgiving

‘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.

2 ‘So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

5 ‘And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

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.

Joel 2.1-2, 12-17

Blow 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—

² a 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.

¹² Yet even now, says the Lord,

 return to me with all your heart,

with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;

¹³ rend 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.

¹⁴ Who 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?

¹⁵ Blow the trumpet in Zion;
sanctify a fast;

call a solemn assembly;

¹⁶ gather 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.

¹⁷ Between 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?” ’

2 Corinthians 5.20b-6.10

²⁰So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.²¹For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

⁶As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. ²For he says,

‘At an acceptable time I have listened to you,
and on a day of salvation I have helped you.’

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! ³We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, ⁴but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, ⁷truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸in honour and dishonour, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.