

Ash Wednesday

20.02.2020
By Pádraig Ó Tuama

Introduction

To begin Lent, the lectionary brings some strong words from the Sermon on the Mount. This sermon — the first of five sermons gathered in Matthew's gospel — is a collection of mini-sermons from Jesus, including the Beatitudes, and the famous lines about loving your enemy. However, the texts chosen for today focus on two serious issues: Reward and Performance.

In conflict, there are always the stated goals and the unstated interests. Mostly, we are happy to state our goals: we want the conflict to improve, we want a restoration to a proper order etc. But it's the unstated interests that drive conflict: we want to win; we want to see someone's downfall; we want our reputation to increase and so on. The lectionary texts for today speak to this, calling the followers of the way to be people who are not seeking reward in the here-and-now, but rather are focused on living with an integrity today, without hiding, and without performing to a secret crowd whose adulation we desire.

If our performance in conflict could be more akin to this type of behaviour, we might be able to see each other face to face, and find the courage to change, or compromise or assert or collaborate as is most fitting.

Text

Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

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

“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. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“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. But 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.

“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. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so 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.

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Comment

One of the complicated questions of the world — even though it doesn't seem complicated — is *What is a group?* A group is a group of people; but is that group of people static or fluid? If two groups of people meet and mingle, are they two groups or one group? What defines that? If a person in a group has a conversion experience that means they begin to think or act differently to others within that group, are they still a part of that group? Is a conversation between two people a group conversation? What makes a group? If you are on a bus, you might be an individual on a bus. But if that bus crashes, the experience can mean that the individuals suddenly begin to think of themselves as a group.

The psychoanalyst Lacan wrote many impenetrable books. (They're good to read if you're content to only understand one sentence per page; an exercise that is surprisingly enjoyable) In defining a group, he said “A group is a collection of people who say all kinds of things to each other.” I find this definition compelling because it moves from the quantitative question to the qualitative question. Note: he didn't say “all kinds of *lovely* things to each other” or even “all kinds of *horrible* things to each other”, just “all kinds of things”. Lacan's definition isn't final — I don't think it's trying to be — groups can happen between people who say nothing to each other too, and for more than a few reasons.

In many ways, today's text for Ash Wednesday is one about group behaviour. The words of Jesus of Nazareth to his listeners address questions of how individuals behave in a group setting. Jesus — strange as it may seem — is telling people to pay attention to each other, and less to their imagination of God. Take piety down a peg or two, he seems to be saying — don't display your devotion for the purpose solely of displaying your devotion. Look at each other, pay attention to each other. Perhaps he was experiencing something akin to name-dropping, with people name-dropping their God at every moment “This morning, in my 90 minute quiet-time” somebody might have been saying, or “sorry for not looking my best, I was too busy praying to worry about a shower” or “excuse me for leaving this meeting early, I have an appointment with the Lord”. Turn towards each other, he seems to be saying: look each other in the face, talk to each other, be with each other. It is in this interpersonal engagement that the God seems to be found, in all authenticity, as a group experience between people who keep their private devotions going in order to nurture their interpersonal sincerity.

Give Money, Jesus seems to say, and Pray, and Fast, and Don't Accumulate Too Much, but be relaxed about it; don't use these things as an economy to prove your worth. If you're worth something, you're worth something, pray, fast and give anyway. Be face to face with each other.

“Go to your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret”.

The word ‘secret’ here is curious. It’s *kryptos* from which we get the word *cryptic* in English. It means to hide, to conceal, to keep secret, and in other literature of the Christian scriptures, it is translated as ‘inward’ or even as part of the term ‘inner self’. The group behaviour that this text seems to be speaking about creates a powerful connection between a person’s private behaviour and the person’s public engagement. This goes far beyond the idea that your secret bad habits will eventually be revealed; and calls the readers of the text to practice quiet, un-broadcasted inner behaviours that are for the nurture of self and others.

What influence might such behaviour have in a conflict? In a conflict, there are always the stated goals and the unstated interests. Mostly, we are happy to state our goals: we want the conflict to improve, we want a restoration to a proper order etc. But it’s the unstated interests that drive conflict: we want to win; we want to see someone’s downfall; we want our reputation to increase and so on. The lectionary texts for today speak to this, calling the followers of the way to be people who are not seeking reward in the here-and-now, but rather are focused on living with an integrity today, without hiding, and without performing to a secret crowd whose adulation we desire. Our behaviour during conflict should reflect a person who has nurtured their inner life, and their generous life, and their life that is not addicted to accumulation. Much of conflict behaviour — or, to be accurate, poor conflict behaviour — can be analysed through the lens of fear of change. Today’s lectionary text asks all to do whatever it is that they can do in private — in secret, in the inner person — to mean they can be fully present to all kinds of things that happen in public.

Response

Ironic as it might seem, it may be worth while sharing with a group the kinds of things you do to gather yourself in private.

Some of this might be recognisably devout: reading texts, time in meditation.

Some of it might be as simple as a solitary walk, or keeping a diary, or writing a haiku a day, or a yoga practice, or taking the dog on a walk, or taking 20 seconds while the kettle boils — whatever works.

The aim isn’t to intimidate each other with stories of time-consuming devotion, but rather to recognise that each individual can find what works for themselves, without the burden of comparison. But hearing some people’s practices can give ideas for how a person can test and try and find a way that works best for them. As Ignatius of Loyola said: “That level of prayer is best for each particular individual where God our Lord communicates Himself more. He sees, he knows, what is best for each one and, as he knows all, he shows each the road to take. What we can do to find that way with his divine grace is to seek and test the way forward in many different fashions, so that an individual goes ahead in that way which for him or her is the clearest and happiest and most blessed in this life.”

Prayer

Jesus, seeker of quiet places,

you were surrounded by so many people
so much of the time.
May we find the kind of quiet that works for us
so that we, in public,
can manifest the dignity of a quiet inner life,
even when we're busy,
even when we're very busy
even when we feel like we have no time

Amen.