

Ash Wednesday

01.03.2017
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Introduction

Ash Wednesday? What memories, stories and experiences do you bring to this day? What is it about for you? Sin, failure, despair, death? Or something different.

Religion has a bad press. For good reason. So much violence throughout the world has a religious motivation. As someone living in Northern Ireland I am used to people asking, why are Catholics and Protestants fighting each other?

Is there good religion and bad religion? If so how do we know what is what? And how do we know if we are following bad religion. This is what Jesus in this reading from the Sermon on the Mount is addressing.

Text

“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

If you are not ‘pious’, don’t take comfort in the beginning of our reading. The word translated ‘pious’ is actually ‘righteousness’ or ‘justice’. Jesus is not talking about the act, but the attitude to which we all too easily succumb. The attitude Jesus is referring to has to do with our concern about how we appear to others.

There is a prevalent myth that each of us are individuals, that we make up our own minds, and make choices freely and independently. As René Girard has shown, this is in fact nonsense. We exist in relation to, we borrow our desires from others. We want an object because someone else has shown us this object is desirable. This leads to constant rivalry with others. Rivalry is conflict, and to experience conflict is to experience threat and insecurity. In response, we act to gain superiority over others. Our religious practice can be yet another example of rivalry in our lives.

In verses 2–4 we have the contrast. Our religious practice may indeed win the admiration of others, and we are told by Jesus, that is our reward. But to act freely, lovingly, for the good of the other alone, in secret, will go unnoticed by others, but “your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

In verses 5–6, the same principle is applied to prayer. We should pray in secret not for show. In verses 7–8 when we fast we should freshen up so that our fast can remain free from rivalry with others.

For me, René Girard has given us an insight about human existence – our rivalry with others. It is this rivalry which leads to the prevalence of violence in our relationships, homes, communities, countries and nations.

There is another way, and that is the way of the Gospel, the way of freedom. The free gift of God’s love in Jesus Christ secures our identity beyond all doubt. So dwelling in Christ we are set free of our need to rival others and liberated instead to love others as he has loved us.

So the verses in today’s reading from the Sermon on the Mount are not so much ‘commands’ that must be obeyed, but signposts to freedom in Christ. Where we seek our security and identity will be a choice between investing our lives in what is passing, disposable and corruptible, where as to find our identity as a gift from God made real for us in the person of Jesus Christ, is to find lasting fulfillment.

‘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’ Matthew 6 19–21*

Response

Remember a conflict you have experienced. Did the conflict escalate? If so did rivalry between the participants play a part?

In the conflict you have been thinking about, what kind of action would have broken the rivalrous spiral?

What has this to do with hypocrisy? V16

Among your relationships can you identify one which has a tendency towards rivalry? If so what can you do to free yourself from rivalry?

These verses refer to context of religious observance and worship. What are your thoughts about rivalry in the Christian community?

Prayer

From dust we came

From dust we came

to dust we will return

We belong to God

We gather in penitence

we gather in confidence

We belong to God

At the beginning of Lent

at every moment of our lives

We belong to God

