

Ash Wednesday

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Introduction

On Ash Wednesday, we consider where in our lives we may be falling short, or missing the mark. Perhaps we reflect on relationships that have been strained, and consider the role of our egos in leading us down a path of self-centeredness.

The lectionary reading for today relates to our inner world. There is a strong imperative to express a devotion to God in a hidden way, untethered from what people think of us. Yet if we read this text on its own, there is a danger that we become overly focused on the privatisation of our faith and ignore the public faith Jesus preached about in the previous chapter, Matthew 5.

The words of Jesus in Matthew 5, 6 and 7 were spoken in a context of conflict. The Romans were ruling over the Jewish people militarily. Simultaneously in the Gospels, we see a picture of a desperate people under the shadow not only of the Roman eagle, but also under the equally oppressive weight of heartless religious manipulation. This call to faux-piety involved getting people's adherence and obedience by accentuating how far short they were falling from the impossibly rigorous standards of religious leaders.

Wherever we are, we face a political context and a religious context. We need to give attention to the outer, and the inner. As you prepare for this week's reflection, we invite you to pause and consider where your attention is being drawn.

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

It's thought that the Sermon on the Mount, of which this week's lectionary reading is a part, was given on a hilltop near Capernaum in Galilee, two place names which locate the words of this Gospel reading in real physical spaces. A place, a hill, a village, nestled alongside two powerful currents which Jesus' audience had to navigate: a society where religion was very important and a brutal Roman occupation. Roman soldiers and Roman crosses; Pharisees and not eating honey on the sabbath.

When reading this passage, I wonder what sounds you can imagine. What smells were floating over the nearby hills? What did the cloud formations look like over the expanse of the Sea of Galilee? Was the sun reflecting off the water that sits below what is now called the Mount of Beatitudes? Maybe more importantly, were Roman soldiers standing nearby, and were religious leaders in the crowd, their religious finery on display for everyone to see?

It is nearly twenty years since my first visit to this holy site. I've since been back several times, and each time I have sat on the green grass outside The Church of the Beatitudes and read in one sitting the entirety of the Sermon on the Mount. I can still recall a conversation with a friend during my first visit. She was reflecting on the geopolitics of first century Palestine and the nature of the Roman occupation. The Mount itself is a stone's throw from the small village of Capernaum, the ancient remains of which are still visible. My friend pointed out that in such towns, the occupying Roman army would have made their presence felt. They didn't want disturbances in rebellious parts of their empire, and crucifixions were a categorical signal of a zero-tolerance policy.

When Jesus spoke his famous sermon, there was a context.

As much as Roman rule is the background hum of the Gospels, the other power that is continuously present in the narratives is that of the religious authorities. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount draws attention to both of these "powers" in very different ways. In Matthew 5, we are implored in the face of enemies to "let your light shine", or as Eugene Peterson put it: "We're going public with this". Yet in this reading from Matthew 6, we repeatedly hear Jesus tell his followers to do things in secret and behind closed doors, to make sure no one sees. There is striking mixed messaging between being seen in Matthew 5 and being unseen in Matthew 6.

The Sermon on the Mount was a means of confronting the religious and political powers of the day. But it was a very different kind of confrontation. In Matthew 5, Jesus encourages his hearers to overcome hate with love: to love their enemies (the Romans). In Matthew 6, they are told to overcome public self-righteousness (the way of "the hypocrites") with private devotion and humility. If loving indiscriminately as the rain falls and the sun shines was the message of the fifth chapter of Matthew, then confronting the perpetual pull to the yeast of the Pharisees was the message of Chapter 6. Jesus preached a righteous self-forgetfulness, that wasn't intended to rival the piety of the religious leaders but to subvert it with an ethic of hiddenness.

Jesus so clearly wanted to subvert these powers, but he was not interested in fomenting rivalry with the Romans or with the religious leaders. Instead, he was laying the building blocks for an alternative beloved community, founded on a new value system, that would include everyone, because everyone, according to the Beatitudes, would be "blessed". This community ethic seems to be one of the underlying reasons for the rapid spread of Christianity in the first three centuries after Jesus' death and resurrection. This new community was not so much the antithesis of the powers but maybe an entirely new Way founded on altruism and mercy. He wasn't content to create a community of conflict survivors, he was also challenging that community about their own practices of conflict.

A few years ago I was running a large residential centre for a Christian community. I was walking by the back garden where we kept our eight black wheelie bins, which had just been emptied. The sight I saw will live with me forever. Our oldest community member was a 75 year old Franciscan sister, and the closest living likeness to St Francis I have ever met. Sr Anna Mary, taking no mind for her chronic back pain, was standing on a plastic chair next to an open bin with a hose pipe in one hand and a hard-bristle broom in the other. Very quietly and discreetly she was cleaning the inside of the bins. She hadn't intended for her act of piety to be seen by me, or anyone. I went outside and proceeded to enquire as to what she was doing. She said, "The inside of these bins is a mess. It looks and smells atrocious. It is so disrespectful for us to expect those bin men to take our bins in this state". Despite my protestations then and at other times, she carried on this sacramental ritual of private and hidden cleaning of the inside of wheelie bins.

Sr Anna Mary had been a missionary sister for over 50 years, serving all over the world. Her life and travel, (and perhaps her inner travel, too) had caused this blessed living saint to learn the same lessons Jesus was trying to teach in Matthew 6. Competing for fame and fortune where moth and rust consumes, for adulation and for the praise of religious authorities, will only lead to a greater disconnect between your outer shell of self, and your true self. She had learned she could become truly and fully herself in the place of quiet, hidden service to others, instead of in rivalry with them.

Response

Can you remember a time where you did something in secret for someone? Was this act "selfless"?

Can you remember when you did something that was not in secret? Can you remember when you did something ostensibly for someone else, but which was, in reality, a mechanism to acquire something?

Think of a conflict you're involved in. How is it that your own inner life can help you navigate the movement towards justice?

Take some time to reflect on these things and bring them into the light of the Divine gaze.

Prayer

God of the small.
You see what we sometimes choose not to.
Help us to love in brave quiet,
With eyes wide open to the things in front of us that we can't or won't see.
Because your hands touch the everyday and small.
Amen