

Ash Wednesday

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Introduction

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent – the 40-day season during which Christians traditionally embrace certain disciplines as a way of emulating Jesus' time in the wilderness and preparing for Easter. Often this takes the form of 'giving up' something – fasting from chocolate, or alcohol or using social media or whatever we might feel has too much control over us. Properly understood though, Lent is not simply about self-deprivation as a virtue in itself, but about cultivating the discipline required to live abundantly. We can use the season to take stock of our habits and choices, reflecting on which ones help us to live in hopeful, hospitable and generous ways which reflect the values of the Kingdom, and on how we can foster these; and considering how we can change or overcome those which pull us in directions which diminish abundant living for ourselves or others.

The Gospel readings set for Lent in year B move between passages from the Synoptics and John, but despite differences in feel there are also distinct threads which run through them. It is one of these – things hidden and things revealed – which we will be tracing in our reflections over the next few weeks, and applying to our explorations of the contours and practice of a spirituality of conflict.

Anchor Question

How might you conduct a life audit – either for yourself or with your church – over Lent? Make a list of ideas and then choose one or two which you think you could realistically follow-through on.

If you've already chosen to embark on a specific discipline are there ways in which you could use this to provide some space or support for your audit plans?

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

Fasting, almsgiving, and prayer – three traditional Christian Lenten disciplines – were also cardinal works in the religious life of observant Jews at the time of Jesus (note that it is ‘*when* you pray/fast/give’ rather than ‘*if* you...’). Indeed that almsgiving was a sacred duty is evidenced by its sharing of the word *tsedaqah* with ‘righteousness’, and it is this which forms the backdrop against which Jesus makes his comments. The text addresses two things – practice and orientation, and the absence of the verses outlining the Lord’s prayer to divert us into other channels forces us instead to focus on these and on what lies behind Jesus’ stinging comments.

If we turn to the issue of practice, we have our first encounter with the hidden/revealed motif of which we will see different facets as we follow the Lenten Gospel texts. The message here is unambiguous – those who pray, fast, or give alms primarily as a way of drawing attention to their own piety have not only subverted the true intent of these actions but have prevented themselves from enjoying the spiritual benefits which naturally flow from them.

Three times Jesus uses the phrase ‘they have their reward’ (6:2, 6:5, 6:16) but a better translation might be “they have received payment in full.” The Greek verb (ἀπεχέσθαι) which is used here is a technical commercial word which was used on receipted accounts to signify that full payment had been made. In other words, the notice and admiration of their fellows will be the sum total of what they get for their public piety. In contrast those who pray, give, and fast without drawing attention to themselves will receive something of more value than the admiration of others. This time a different verb (ἀποδοῖναι) is used and conveys a correspondingly different understanding of recompense – that of someone giving out from a sense of what is owed (and perhaps also from something which reflects the nature of the giver). The same form is used later in Matthew (16:27) in connection with the rewards to be given by the glorified Christ on his return, as well as by Zaccheus (Luke 19:8) when he announces his intention to pay back ‘four-times as much’ to those he may have defrauded.

This seems straightforward, but at the same time this injunction to secrecy could be seen as being somewhat in tension with that Jesus has previously given in Matthew 5:16 to “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” However the key to resolving this paradox – and the first piece in our hidden/revealed pattern – lies in the closing phrase and in what has preceded it a few verses earlier: Jesus’ direction to his hearers to be like a lamp set on a stand follows directly on from the beatitudes. These very specific attitudes and behaviours are linked to the Kingdom of God and point towards the nature of that Kingdom and its King. Those who live in such a way, says Jesus, will ‘glorify’ God and, as we shall explore further during Lent,

‘glorification’ is closely linked to making God more visible in the world.

Thus one way of reading the dichotomy Jesus lays bare in today’s Gospel passage is to see it as being not simply or solely about public verses private actions, but as also about where our actions ultimately point: towards what or whom is the attention of those who see our acts (whether of charity, or specific religious observances) directed?

There is a close link here as well to the second element which the text addresses – that of the orientation which governs where we put our time and effort. Again the message is disconcertingly simple – Jesus, using various pictures of wealth in 1st Century Palestine, cautions against a primary investment in that which will wear out, or which could be eroded, or stolen. Instead he urges his hearers to lay up ‘treasures in heaven’ – a phrase which would not only have been very familiar to them but also held specific associations with doing deeds of kindness and with the development of good character – the only thing which a person could take with them when they left this world. What we set our heart on or ascribe value to will direct where our gaze is turned and our energies expended, and this too will have a profound effect on our choices of how to live. It will also be another factor in where the gaze of those who meet or know us is directed by those encounters.

Today’s Gospel reading then raises two key questions which can shine a light on all areas of our lives – including our approaches to managing conflicts of different shapes and sizes – as we journey on through Lent: Firstly do our words and actions in a situation primarily draw attention to ourselves, serving as vehicles to bolster or boost our own ego, status or reputation? Or do they point towards other things – ideals, principles, beliefs which shape our actions, or the work and wisdom of others? Secondly where are we choosing to invest our time, energy, and other resources – and are these things which will ultimately be life-enhancing for ourselves and others?

Response

Think of a situation – perhaps, though not necessarily, involving conflict – in which you have recently been a principle player. Spend a few minutes recalling your actions and words and make a list of any key ones which stand out to you. Reflect on these in the light of the questions above.

Are there things which you might do differently another time? Are there practices or skills which you might spend time exploring or developing as an investment for the future?

Prayer

Jesus – God made visible in the world,
May our words and actions
always point towards you and your Kingdom,
that we too
may be those whose lives
reveal the image of God.
Amen
