

Ash Wednesday

Public Piety and Private Reality



The Gospel reading for Ash Wednesday (Matthew 6: 1-6 and 16-21) exposes two juxtaposed ways of going about life that they are in effect, two different ways of *being*.

On the one hand, there are those who want to be very public and showy,

- giving alms to the poor in a very ostentatious manner,
- praying to God in a way that draws attention to one's self,
- and fasting in a way which seems to demand admiration from others.



On the other hand, there are those who wish to avoid attention.

- good deeds escape detection by personal discretion,
- prayers are offered to God in ways which don't promote the self,
- and fasting which doesn't impinge on other people.

Of course, there are people who tend to fit one of these descriptions more than others, but in reality, this division is one which we all find within ourselves, struggling for supremacy. We are both these people, and we struggle to create a balance between them which will be right for us.

Why do people need to use religion to promote themselves or boost their image? I suppose the root is in our lack of confidence in ourselves. We need convincing of the efficacy of our religious responses and so we test out what other people are thinking by posing for them. At its heart, this is simply a lack of faith in God. The self-promoter doesn't really believe that God will notice and so goes for a bit of attention from other people.

I think that if you can bear with the over-simplification, you can divide the great faiths of the world into two groups:

First, there are those who believe that in the end, if we don't pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps, we will sink in the hierarchy of being until such time as we do make more effort. Then we will rise again until we become good enough to escape the wheel of life and find nirvana.

Secondly, there are those who find human effort to be ultimately inadequate to the task of curing our ills. We look to God to come in and make things right again. We do also need to make the effort, but we do not put our trust in our effort but in God's inspiration and leading.

In an oversimplification, the Jewish, Christian and Moslem faiths are all of the second type and the Hindu, Buddhist and Sikh faiths are of the first type. Christianity in particular stresses the inability of humanity to do enough to make things work as God intended. Only God himself can do this for us. We can choose to do good things, and we should choose the best we can, but because we don't put our **ultimate** trust in our own efforts, we seek a Saviour, a redeemer who enters our realm and shows us how to live and how to recover the sense of oneness with God, both in the sense of oneness with God's will and purposes and that closeness to our Creator which so many of us desire to experience.

In his teaching seen in the Gospel Jesus offers us reassurance that:

- we don't need to please other people in order to find God's approval.
- we don't need to be seen to be good by other people, only by God.
- we don't need to advertise our good parts because God sees them already.

And this teaching is of course, backed up by reassurance that we can rely on God to see us as we really are. That would make you or I blush if we were to see each other as we really are, but we can allow God to do this without embarrassment. Indeed, we can't avoid God seeing us the way we really are. We may fool other people, and we may even try to fool ourselves, but at least we can never fool God. With that bottom line ever before us, we have a route to safety from whatever bleak positions we may have manoeuvred ourselves into. In a way, rather than a worry, it's a cause for relief that we can't disguise our real lives and our deepest motives from God. In the end, there is a hard centre of reality which we can't avoid. I find that thought comforting more than threatening, although it also scares me and shames me.

In the Liturgy of Penitence we say in the Ash Wednesday liturgy, we invoke the name of God to support our disciplined living as Christians, especially during Lent. We then invoke the life and death of Jesus Christ to be our deliverance from all that hinders our discipleship. It's a potent and thrilling liturgy. It should be said slowly, allowing time to let sink in just what human issues are raised for us by each of the petitions. It would repay you to take it home for a day or so and read it again, pray it again, in private.

I hope that all of us will manage to use this liturgy well on Ash Wednesday and I hope that you make the most of your Lenten journey towards Holy Week and Easter this year.

'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.

Matthew 6 verse 1

As an extension of this theme, read the following parable of Jesus (see illustration) and reflect on your own situation.

"Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.' "(Luke 18: 9-14)

