

Mt. 6.1-6, 16-21; 2 Cor.5.20b-6.10; Joel 2.1-2, 12-17.

Ash Wednesday, 10th February 2016.

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart always be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer (Ps.19:14).

We're well into the new year now and as ever since the formation of the earth, the days are beginning to 'lengthen' - hence the term, 'Lent,' - an abbreviation from the old english word. As the days grow longer, so our time in the light of day increases, and so it is fitting that we devote something of ourselves, and the time we've been given, to reviewing our motives and integrity.

In contemplation, self-examination and reflection we can recall our fundamental beliefs. To remember precisely who it was who first brought light into the world, who it is that *is* the light of the world; who it was that brought us to life; who it is that leads us out of darkness, through the wilderness, and on into eternal life.

Ash Wednesday offers us the opportunity to take seriously our utter dependence on God in Christ. How quickly can things turn to dust and ashes without the grace of God sustaining and leading us. How quickly can we become lost when we rely solely on our own virtue or merit.

In the book of Joel, drought has spread disease and despair, and locusts remove any final vestige of greenery, and with this, hope. A solemn assembly has been called to offer sacrifice and pray for God's mercy even though all seems lost. Joel's message is that it is never too late to ask for God's help, but fasting, weeping, and the tearing of garments will be of no avail unless their hearts are truly turned too.

So in Joel's mind the message is of hope, but this is a Hope with uncertainty. 'Who knows?' he says, 'It may be...' ...but in Paul's appeal there is no doubt about the divine response, for God has already taken action: 19 ['Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break](#)

[in and steal](#)). The good news is that in the death of Jesus a paradoxical exchange has taken place: ²¹[For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.](#)

And yet, is it possible to receive this amazing grace in vain? (v.6.1). The Corinthians have not distinguished themselves, other than in their dissension, status-seeking, resentment and critical spirit. Paul offers himself and his colleagues as examples of Christian integrity; their attitudes and actions are consonant with their calling. They are rich in grace, and through their ministry, others can find grace too.

Matthew gives three examples from Jesus' teaching about personal piety: **Almsgiving** - not an option but a religious duty. With no welfare state the poor depended on this well-organized charity for support. Jesus was not impressed by the hypocrites (Gk. 'actors'), who give ostentatiously in search of approval and applause. He was not impressed by **Public Prayers**, where those who wanted to be admired for their devotions would seek deliberately to be noticed. Rather the true disciple prays in secret from the heart. And **Fasting** was accepted practice in Jewish life - strict Pharisees fasted twice a week. A face smeared with dirt and ash left no one in doubt about your piety and self-discipline. True disciples will fast in secret, yet within the sight of God who sees in secret.

Lent offers us the opportunity to review our own motives and integrity in Christ. Do we wear the actors mask, either to play for applause or to disguise what lies behind?

So today we pray for an ever-deepening sense of God's grace throughout the days of Lent and beyond, that we may come to know more nearly, clearly and dearly, the power of his sustaining love, without which we are already the dust to which we will return.

Spoken in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Matthew 6.1-6, 16-21 Concerning Almsgiving

‘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.

² ‘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. ³But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁵ ‘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. ⁶But 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.

¹⁶ ‘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. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so 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.

¹⁹ ‘Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Joel 2.1-2, 12-17

Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near— ² a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness spread upon the mountains a great and powerful army comes; their like has never been from of old, nor will be again after them in ages to come.

¹² Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; ¹³ rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing. ¹⁴ Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain-offering and a drink-offering for the Lord, your God?

¹⁵ Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; ¹⁶ gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her canopy.

¹⁷ Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep. Let them say, ‘Spare your people, O Lord, and do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations. Why should it be said among the peoples, “Where is their God?” ’

2 Corinthians 5.20b-6.10

²⁰So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

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As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. ²For he says, 'At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.' See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! ³We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, ⁴but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, ⁷truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸in honour and dishonour, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

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