

Ash Wednesday, February 26, 2020
Ash Wednesday/Lectionary X/Proper X/Year A
First Reading: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17
Second Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10
Gospel Reading: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
Sermon Title: “Do and Do Not”

Theme

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus commends almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, but emphasizes that spiritual devotion must not be done for show.

Text

[Jesus said to the disciples:] ¹“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.

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.”

Sermon

Today, Ash Wednesday, we begin our forty-day (not including Sundays) journey toward Easter with a day of fasting and repentance.

The season of Lent is intended to be a journey to return to God. Though we have already been reconciled to God through Christ, on Ash Wednesday we humbly, publicly confess our sin more thoroughly and pray for God to make our hearts clean while we rejoice that “now is the day of salvation” (2 Corinthians 6:2)

Chanting Psalm 51 helps to set the proper tone for the season. If you were paying attention, the psalmist speaks for us, our deep personal knowledge of our own sin and need for mercy.

And then there is the imposition of ashes, the marking of our foreheads (or for some, on the back of the hand) with ash. In doing so, we acknowledge that when we die we return to the earth. It is a visible reminder that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. Death and ash is the consequence of our sinfulness. But at the same time, the ash traces the life-giving cross indelibly marked on our foreheads at baptism. We know that because we are baptized, we are claimed by God revealed in Christ Jesus, and while the ashen cross can be washed off, God’s claim on us cannot be removed.

In the Prayer of the Day for today we acknowledged that God loves all of his creation, but God is also just and righteous and can’t bear to look upon our sin, and so this day and this season provide us with a more intentional opportunity to repent. In the Prayer of the Day we said, “Create in us new and honest hearts, so that, truly repenting of our sins, we may receive from you, the God of all mercy, full pardon and forgiveness.”

As I said in my first words, Ash Wednesday and Lent are the creation of the early church. The Church in its ancient wisdom saw the need for a season to ponder the mystery of the Passion.

But in the Gospel Reading, our Lord Jesus wasn’t giving his disciples a teaching about Lent. On the contrary, the Gospel Reading for today calls us to return to our baptismal call, by more intentionally bearing the fruits of mercy and justice in the

world. The context is the Sermon on the Mount at the beginning of Jesus public ministry, not the end. Since many of us try to respond to the call to “fast and pray” more diligently during Lent, we appropriate this text to Ash Wednesday.

Specifically, about that Jesus said,

¹“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.”

Then Jesus taught his disciples at least four “do’s and do not’s” hence the sermon title.

Sacrificial Giving (Special Offerings)

²“So whenever you give alms, *do not* sound a trumpet before you.

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.

Alms are a special sacrificial offering. Maybe for Lent you will give something up that you enjoy. I don’t think God cares if you give up chocolate or coffee for him; but if you take that same money and make a special designated offering to one of your favorite charitable causes, then that is a God-pleasing activity. You have both denied yourself and provided for another. But don’t make a big show of it. In fact, make no show of it at all.

Praying

⁵“And whenever you pray, *do not* be like the hypocrites;

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.

I don’t know any of you who make a big deal out of your spiritual life, and specifically your prayer life, so I don’t know how the “do not” with regard to praying works out for us. But I certainly would encourage you to pick up or step up

your devotional prayer life, and I am providing help with that through the Model for Devotional Prayer that I have published.

Fasting

¹⁶“And whenever you fast, *do not* look dismal,

But 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.

Let us not limit fasting to food. Fasting can be abstaining from anything that in abstaining becomes a sacrifice for us. But abstaining from something is only half the effort, to truly fast means to spend that time we would be using to, let’s say, watch TV, to spend that time in devotional prayer or reading of scripture. Or if that is not your issue, then how about doing something else with your time that is *good* for you, like exercising. You can always pray while exercising.

Self-examination & Repentance

¹⁹“*Do not* store up for yourselves treasures on earth, ²⁰but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

We should most definitely spend time reflecting on our lives, doing some self-examination and where we find habits, practices, issues that are beneath our calling as Christians – little Christs - we should excise them.

Maybe you have thought of something to “not do” as part of your Lenten devotion. I would suggest that this pattern of “Do not and do” is Christ-like and God-pleasing.

And finally then, let me caution you with one more “do not”. Do not make a “work” out of whatever extra Lenten discipline you take on. As Jesus instructed, do it humbly and quietly. If you mess up, do not get defeated, and do get back on track.

Our emphasis should be on returning to the Lord. Nothing more, and nothing less.

Prayer

Merciful God, accompany our journey through these forty days. Renew us in the gifts of baptism, that we may provide for those who are poor, pray for those in need, fast from self-indulgence, and above all that we may find our treasure in the life of your son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen