

Wednesday 14 February, 2018

*A sermon preached by the Dean, the Very Revd Dr Andreas Loewe
at the 12.15pm Eucharist with Imposition of Ashes on Ash Wednesday.*

The season of Lent is one of renewal and refreshment for the soul, and our Gospel reading today (St Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21) reminds us that our Lenten practise and observance should benefit our inner lives if it is to be a rewarding experience. Jesus was talking to a crowd of people who had come a mountain in Galilee to hear him preach – which is why we often call the extended series of teachings from which today's gospel reading is taken, his 'sermon on the mount'. Jesus had just taught the people that they are blessed if they are poor in spirit, or mourn, or strive for God's justice; that they are blessed if they show mercy to others, make peace, or are persecuted for the sake of God's just cause: they will indeed receive great reward in heaven, and will receive the kingdom that God promises to those who love him: 'rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven', he tells them (St Matthew 5:12). If your actions promote the work of the kingdom of heaven in this world, Jesus told them, then you will receive a reward in heaven, even if no one thanks you now on earth for what you are doing. Those who labour for the things of God not seeking recompense in this life, but because they love God and care for their neighbour, will be praised in heaven – even if those on earth ignore their labours.

Today's reading takes this thought further and turns it on its head: those who do the things of God out of a sense of duty, turn them into a chore or, worse still, into a spectacle, have already received their reward, Jesus says. The works they do – fasting, praying, supporting those who have nothing – *are* good works, they may even contribute to the building up of the kingdom of heaven (for all 'who are not against us are for us', Jesus says – St Matthew 12:30). But the *reward* inherent in the works, the spiritual value of the works themselves, has been received – through the approbation of others. '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' (St Matthew 6:2). The things that we do for God *without* seeking the approval of others, on the other hand, Jesus tells, will receive the approval of another: 'your Father who sees in secret will reward you' (St Matthew 6:4). When we work for God, not out of a sense of obligation or duty, but out of a sense of love and devotion, then we may very likely not receive the praise of others but God our Father, 'who sees in secret, will reward' us (6:4).

What does that mean for the way we enter the season of Lent? Isn't it rather ostentatious to receive a cross marked in ash on our foreheads as a symbol of our fasting? After all, 'those who show others that they are fasting have received their reward', Jesus tells in our gospel reading, and explicitly encourages us to 'pour oil on our heads and wash our face, so that our fasting may be seen not by others, but by our Father who is in secret; and our Father who is in secret will reward us' (St Matthew 6:16-17). Does that mean we should quietly wipe off the ash cross as soon as we have received it? That depends on our intention, Jesus might say. If we display the cross as a sign of our spiritual superiority – 'I remembered that it was Ash Wednesday and came to the Cathedral and received this cross, and you did not' – then yes, wash the cross off your forehead straightaway if you seek after any reward greater than the approval of our fellows. But if you receive the sign of

ashes as a symbol of taking on Christ's cross, and doing in the spirit of Jesus and the secret of your heart the things of God, without seeking the praise of others, then *wear* it – contritely, humbly.

Earlier in the sermon of the mount, Jesus taught his listeners that those who are reviled and persecuted and falsely accused on his account should rejoice. I know from past experience that walking through the streets of Melbourne with an ash cross on one's forehead in the Ash Wednesday lunch crowd does not lead to vilification, or invite comment. A few people know the reason for the smudge on the forehead and might be on their own way from church, or to church in the evening. Most people probably assume that the black mark on our heads was accidental. Very few people have ever engaged me in conversation on the streets – the only comment I once received was the question whether I was a religious person. Yes, I was, I said, and in my tradition this marks Lent, the beginning of a period of giving up and taking on things, a period when we think more about others and about God than we might usually do, as we prepare ourselves to receive the new life that Jesus brought at the great feast that follows this 40 day fast, Easter. The lady nodded politely, thanked me, and proceeded on her way past *Young and Jacksons*. And I had received my reward. And I hope she, too, found the exchange rewarding rather than bewildering.

Lent, then, is about an inner conversion, and inner change. Something that happens in secret; deep inside us. It's not so much about the externals – the giving up of chocolate biscuits, or coffee, or wine; or the resolve to go to the gym more often. Lent is about the things that will renew and refresh our faith from within – unheard by others, unseen by others, noticed only by God our Father. So, this Lent, receive the sign of the cross as a symbol of that inner conversion and not as a sign of duty done or a conversation starter. This Lent, do the things that will make you a better follower of Jesus, not so that others might notice your greater holiness, but so that you might be a better disciple.

This Lent give abundantly of who you are and what you have, not so that others might praise you and trumpet about it, but so that you might gain the joy of knowing that you were able to help another – and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. This Lent pray more deeply, not by heaping up words or praying longer – though sometimes entering into a deeper form prayer requires us to get to the point where the words cease and the heart enters into the communion with God that enables 'our Father to know before we ask him' (St Matthew 6:8). This Lent pray more profoundly, so that you will become renewed and refreshed in prayer, and experience the sense of gratitude and love for God that is the sole reward we will receive in this world from the actions we do for God in secret.

A prayer of St Ignatius of Loyola:

Teach us, good Lord,
to serve you as you deserve,
to give and not to count the cost,
to fight and not to heed the wounds,
to toil and not to seek for rest,
to labour and not to ask for any reward,
save that of knowing that we do your will. Amen.