

## **Sermon for 5<sup>th</sup> March 2025, Year C, Ash Wednesday**

**Preached at St Serf's Shettleston and St John's Baillieston**

**Isaiah 58:1-12; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21**

Jesus' words in our gospel today are recorded as part of the same 'Sermon on the Mount' in which he declares that we should put our light on a lampstand, so I've always found it a bit confusing that in the same sermon he also tells us to do all our good works in secret so that our left hand doesn't know what our right hand is doing. It seems like Jesus is contradicting himself but since he said both things at the same time, we must assume there's some way to reconcile the two and show the light of our faith to the world while also not showing off our virtue for all to see.

Otherwise, we might feel a little bit anxious about the very visible cross we're just about to have emblazoned in ash on our foreheads. "Whenever you fast," says Jesus, "do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting... instead, put oil on your head and wash your face". Oops. Are we about to do exactly what Jesus tells us not to?

Well, I think it depends on what your motivation is. If you're going to walk out of this service, wailing for your sins, showing off your forehead and boasting to everyone you meet how holy you are, especially if you have a trumpeter walking a few metres in front of you announcing your goodness, then I might gently suggest you may have fallen into the sort of false humility that Jesus is preaching against.

Likewise, if you're doing good works and giving to charity because you desire the accolades and praise and gratitude that you receive on account of them, then according to Jesus you have already received your reward, and God is not impressed.

There are of course much worse reasons to try to look like a saint than because you enjoy the praise and gratitude of those you help. In recent history, some apparently saintly men have been found to have been using their saintliness as a cover for sexually abusing women and men, and the public honour they received for their very visible good works only served to make it harder if not impossible for their victims to be heard.

It's one of the reasons monks and nuns are hidden in cloisters, and hermits hide in huts and caves. Their apparent holiness gives them great spiritual power and perhaps a great temptation to exploit it. Who doesn't want to be seen as a saint? You can get away with all kinds of things if no one suspects you're capable of it.

So, what Jesus is saying is, when you do things or don't do things for the sake of God, make sure it actually is for the sake of God, and not because it makes you look good, or wise, or holy, or whatever. This is what it means to have your left hand not know what your right hand is doing. In this metaphor, your left hand is the one that cares about what people think of you, so the best way to avoid doing things for selfish acclaim is simply by being the sort of Christian who has no longing for such things because your focus is entirely on loving others, not what you personally get out of it.

That's not to say you're not allowed to feel any joy in doing good for others. Taking joy and delight in loving God and people and creation is what we're made for. I find great joy in leading worship and spending time visiting people; not because I want to be the centre of attention, but because I love seeing the kingdom of God rising up in people's hearts, and I want to do everything I can to make a space for that to happen.

Jesus, then, tells us that when we're fasting, or our modern equivalent of giving up things in Lent, we must be careful not to boast about what we're giving up; neither should our goal for giving up chocolate be to lose weight. This isn't really the sort of fasting that God has in mind.

The prophet Isaiah gives us an emphatic account of God's opinion on the subject. "Look," God says, "you fast only to serve your own interest on your fast-day... is this really the fast that I choose, a day to humble yourself, to bow down your head like a bulrush and wear sackcloth and ashes?"

The unspoken answer, of course, is no. God isn't looking for a brief show of ritual humility. God is seeking our conversion – our complete change of heart. God continues: "Is not this the fast that I choose, to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?"

God could not be clearer that he cares little for refraining from various foods, or for wearing ashes on our foreheads, if this is not accompanied by true repentance and an active sharing of all the gifts God has given us with those who are excluded for whatever reason from the benefits of our community and society.

It is this sort of good work, performed for the love of God and all humanity, not for our own benefit, that makes our light shine like a lamp on a lampstand.

Isaiah says it explicitly: "If you do these things, then *your light shall break forth like the dawn*, and your healing shall spring up quickly. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then *your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday*... you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations".

This is what it means to fast so that only God can see, to do good so that even our left hand doesn't know what our right hand is doing, while also being the

light of the world and having that light visible to all who encounter us. It is possible to do and be both at once, and God, through Jesus and through Isaiah, showed us the Way, and he is calling us to follow that path now, in this Lent, and always.