

Right Things for The Right Reasons

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Ash Wednesday, February 17, 2010

I.

It seems too soon to stop celebrating, doesn't it. It hasn't even been two weeks since the Saints won the Super Bowl. And the Season of Lent also comes a little earlier this year.

But today is not a time to celebrate. There are no Ash Wednesday parties. No one goes to the drugstore to buy Ash Wednesday cards. And we don't see any big Ash Wednesday sales at the malls. Celebration comes later, at Easter, but for now and for the next forty days we are called to examine our lives.

During this time we are invited to search ourselves for things that might not be in accordance with God's will for us. We ask ourselves whether what we do during the week is consistent with what we say in church on Sunday. And we try to recognize where the world's ways have taken priority over God's ways.

Today is the solemn and significant day upon which it begins. We silently enter in reverence to the occasion. Later in the service we will be marked with ashes in recognition of our mortality as we reaffirm that we are dust, and to dust we shall return.

And then, before we receive communion, we will recite a Litany of Penitence that is unlike any confession we make at any other time. We will acknowledge a long list of our shortcomings, which will include pride, hypocrisy, impatience, and our self-indulgent ways.

II.

The reading we just heard from Matthew's Gospel is one of the pillars of today's liturgy. These words of Jesus have been our reading for every Ash Wednesday since the Episcopal Church was founded in 1789. In England they have been the reading for every Ash Wednesday since the first Book of Common Prayer was written in 1549. And they were read when the practice of Lent began in the ancient early church.

The first half of the first sentence of today's reading tells us why it is so appropriate for this day. Let me read it again. Jesus said, "beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them." That summarizes his basic point. The rest of the reading consists of examples.

Jesus was describing certain hypocritical practices of the Pharisees, local religious leaders who made big productions of their prayers, almsgiving, and fasting. They made ostentatious shows of their faith and religion because they wanted others to see them and be impressed by how religious they were, or so they thought.

But that really isn't the purpose of Lent, is it? We don't commit to a Lenten discipline just to impress others. We hope that during this time we can draw closer to God in truth and sincerity, and with an honest assessment of how we are living our lives. And we cannot achieve those objectives if our self-interest interferes with our self-examination.

III.

A story might illustrate the point. A priest was walking down a street at night when a fellow jumped out from a dark alley, confronted the priest, and told him to hand over his wallet. As the priest started to comply his coat fell aside revealed his clerical collar.

Right away the robber had a change of heart, and said he was sorry because he didn't rob priests. The priest obviously was relieved, and as a gesture of Christian charity reached into his coat pocket, pulled out one of his cigars, and offered it to the other fellow. Well, wouldn't you know that the robber said he couldn't accept it because he had given up cigars for Lent.

What's wrong with that picture? Obviously, this fellow had the wrong idea about Lent. His problem was something more serious than smoking cigars. Like the Pharisees whose religious practices were self-serving, this fellow's Lenten discipline also had no foundation.

The same point can be made with other examples. No matter what we decide to do or not do as Lent begins, we are called to make those decisions for the right reasons. That means discerning and acting in harmony with God's will rather than just being seen by others as godly people.

IV.

At the end of this homily I will invite you in the name of the church to the observance of a holy Lent. The words in our service will describe it as a Lent of self-examination and repentance, of prayer, fasting, and self-denial, and of reading and meditating on God's holy Word.

Those are the ways we seek God's will for us, and they are the ways through which the Holy Spirit makes that will known to us. They will help us draw closer to God.

I will repeat that. They will help us draw closer to God. If we take today's Gospel reading seriously, then drawing closer to God is the reason behind what we have decided to give up or start doing. And I would like to add something to that list of individual disciplines. We also can strengthen our spirituality by sharing in our common life together at St. Thomas.

V.

So, today's Gospel emphasizes not only what we do, but also why we do it. And sometimes looks can be deceiving. Like the hypocrites, we can be tempted to look and act and sound like something we are not. But God is watching. God knows what's in our hearts. And especially at this time, he wants our hearts to be his.

I pray that we will treat this Lenten season as a time of preparation and transformation. It is not a time just to check some boxes on a list, or to dust off some old routines that we might think seem good for Lent.

If we prayerfully seek God's will for us, remembering especially at this time our Lord's suffering and death, we can see more clearly and avoid the obstacles to a holy life that the world places in our path.

At the end of the day, if we search ourselves in prayer, if we are honest with ourselves and our Lord, and if we ask for guidance from the Holy Spirit, we will approach this Lenten season as our Lord intends. We will do the right things for the right reasons, and we will live more completely into the life our Lord holds out to us. *Amen.*