

**Matthew 6:1-6,16-18. True piety is a gift of God.**

Well, my friends, why are you here tonight? Yes, it's Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, and during the service, you will have an ashen cross marked on your forehead. What does that symbolise? The ashes, of course, are a symbol of repentance over sin, but in a fuller picture, they are also a reminder of our human mortality, which is the result of our sinfulness. And the passion of Jesus, his suffering and his going into death to overcome sin for us is what we mark in this season of Lent.

Let's keep all that there in the background as we turn to our text and the challenges it brings to us. So I'll ask again, why are we here together tonight? As we worship and pray openly together and as we allow ourselves to be marked with a cross, are we doing what Jesus here in our text proclaims we shouldn't be doing? Are we publicly parading our piety? Are we ostentatiously demonstrating our religiousness? Couldn't we or perhaps better shouldn't we be marking the beginning of Lent in the privacy of our homes? That seems to be what Jesus is saying, isn't it?

So let's get a few things straight first. Jesus is certainly not condemning or rejecting any of the three religious practices that he singles out here: giving alms, praying, and fasting. Nor is he saying that these actions should never be done publicly, though some people would like to think that, because it would mean that our Christian faith would be a totally private matter, and there would be no place for Christian congregations and pastors, or for any kind of Christian organization.

No, as Jesus constantly does when he speaks, he gets down to the heart of things, to our attitudes towards God, and to the motivation behind how we live out what we believe.

The issue that Jesus deals with here in our text is giving alms, praying, and fasting "in order to be seen by people and to impress them with our piety and to be praised by them." He denounces "announcing our helping the needy with a trumpet fanfare", "praying while standing in the synagogues and on street corners", and "making it obvious that we are fasting by disfiguring our faces." And three times he thumps out his message: "If getting noticed and praised by people is your motivation for giving alms, praying, and fasting" then surely you'll get noticed by people – and that's all you'll get from your pious actions."

Now Jesus calls such persons hypocrites, but we need to realize that Jesus is using the word in quite a different way from our regular use, where we contrast a person's actions with what that person claims to stand for. These hypocrites were doing exactly what they believed, for they believed that their relationship with God rested on their own "righteous acts". They assumed that their outward piety put them into a right relationship with God, but Jesus bluntly tells them they are mistaken, that their focus on themselves makes their relationship with God a pretense, and that they receive nothing from God.

There is the Ash Wednesday challenge for us too. Is God the centre and focus of our lives and of our worship? And of course we have to admit that we too fail the test all too often. But I trust that that's why we're here tonight and will be doing throughout this Lenten season – recognizing our failure to love and trust God totally, recognizing our need for God's grace and forgiveness, and joyfully recognizing Jesus' passion and death as the assurance of God's mercy and love towards us. It's the same wonderful truth that Jesus expressed in his parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector in the Temple. As we humbly and genuinely pray: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner," Jesus assures us that we are right with God. That is the unearned "reward" that our gracious God grant us. Amen.