

We are not converted only once in our lives but many times, and this endless series of large and small conversions, inner revolutions, leads to our transformation in Christ.

Thomas Merton, 1915–1968

A few wise words echoing through Ash Wednesday urge me to deeper things: renewed dedication, constant compassion, and mindful awareness. I leave marvelling at how simple and sublime is this envelope of the soul, which one day return to dust, dust, only dust.

Joyce Rupp, 1943–

Related topics

For further study:

Lent; conversion; fasting; repentance

Closing Prayer

Jesus, holy and strong,
by your fasting and temptation teach us self-denial;
control and discipline us,
that we may learn and obey.

A New Zealand Prayer Book. 1989

Ash Wednesday

Principal Service readings

Joel 2.1-2, 12-17	A warning and a vision of plenty
or Isaiah 58.1-12	True fasting, the Sabbath observance
Psalm 51.1-18	A prayer for forgiveness
2 Corinthians 5.20b– 6.10	Now is the day of salvation
Matthew 6.1-6, 16-21	Good works done in secret
or John 8.1-11	The woman caught in adultery

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,
speak to our hearts in the stillness,
keep us steadfast in the foundation that cannot be shaken,
lift up our eyes to behold the vision of your glory;
and perfect our faith, now and always. Amen.

Society of Saint Francis

Gospel Reading

Good works done in secret

Jesus said to the disciples, "Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

²So 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.

⁵And 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.

¹⁶And 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. ¹⁹Do 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.'

Matthew 6.1-6, 16-21 NRSV¹

Comments and Questions

Today's reading from the gospel of Matthew comes from the teaching occasion known as the Sermon on the Mount. Here, on the mountain, Jesus teaches and shares the law just as the law given to Moses had been promulgated in the past. What Jesus shares is really instructions on how to live a better life. At the beginning of Lent this is very much on our minds. Today's reading is about three marks that are particularly relevant to the season of Lent: almsgiving or charity, prayer, and fasting.

There can be a temptation for any religious person to want to be seen as religious, pleasing to God, and therefore pleasing to others. As we can see from the reading, this sort of person was also noticeable in Jesus' day. Yet, such 'actors' are really 'hypocrites' in the eyes of Jesus, or, more literally translated, 'stage actors'. They are putting on an appearance. In the television series, 'Keeping up appearances',² the main character, Hyacinth Bucket, wants her name to be pronounced 'bouquet', and it goes on from there.

The disciples of Jesus are told that the true audience for their actions is God and not fellow human beings. God cannot be fooled. The disciples of Jesus are encouraged to give alms, to pray, and to fast, but not to make a great show of it.

Disciples of Jesus are to give alms 'in secret'. Some people in Jesus' day would toss coins into the street, making a show of their generosity, as the destitute scampered to retrieve the loose change. Such so-called 'generous' figures have already received their reward by being the object

¹ *New Revised Standard Version Bible* is copyright © 1989 Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

² A British sitcom created and written by Roy Clarke. It originally aired on BBC1 from 1990 to 1995.

of praise by others. It is far better to give secretly; the audience – God in heaven – knows what we do.

Whilst Jesus is not against public prayer (he usually went to the synagogue when he was able to go), he advocated praying secretly, or privately. Our prayer to the Father should be an authentic expression of ourselves, carried out wherever we are.

Similarly, fasting should be done without show, and only for the audience of God in heaven. Fasting is a discipline. It should not be done to impress others, but only in relation to God. Simone Weil restricted her food intake to what she thought the poor people she identified with would have.

On Ash Wednesday we are reminded of our own mortality in the sign of the imposition of ashes. By wearing this stark sacramental sign, marking us as Christians today, we are made more aware that this life is only a prelude to a fuller life to come, a life in which there is true sharing and equality, the hungry are fed, and prayer permeates all our lives.

Quotations

1

Receive this cross of ash upon your brow
Brought from the burning of Palm Sunday's cross;
The forests of the world are burning now
And you make late repentance for the loss.
But all the trees of God would clap their hands,
The very stones themselves would shout and sing,
If you could covenant to love these lands
And recognize in Christ their lord and king.
He sees the slow destruction of those trees,
He weeps to see the ancient places burn,
And still you make what purchases you please
And still to dust and ashes you return.
But Hope could rise from ashes even now
Beginning with this sign upon your brow.

The word in the wilderness / Malcolm Guite. 2014