

Closing Prayer

O God,
you have made us for yourself,
and against your longing there is no defence.
Mark us with your love,
and release in us a passion for your justice
in our disfigured world;
that we may turn from our guilt and face you,
our heart's desire,
through Jesus Christ.

All desires known / Janet Morley. 2005

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
Psalms 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

'Piety' tends to be used in a pejorative sense now, but true piety is holiness. This is a good theme for the beginning of Lent. Jesus gives some advice about growing in piety, in holiness. Almsgiving should be discreet, not paraded in front of others. It is well to be aware that God sees everything, so you do not need to be concerned that he will miss your acts of charity. Similarly, about prayer: don't pray to be noticed. Likewise, with fasting: try to look as if you are not fasting; God will know you are anyway.

We are in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, and the visibility that Jesus proclaimed earlier – 'let your light so shine before others' (5.16), seems to be contradicted by the counsel to do everything in secret. Bonhoeffer suggests that those who would follow Jesus are characterised by a kind of 'forgetfulness'. Following Jesus requires us to lose our overwhelming sense of self. Such a loss often accompanies involvement in any grand movement, but the kind of forgetfulness required to follow Jesus is different from those moments. The forgetfulness Jesus offers is made possible by the compelling reality and beauty of participation in his time, a time that cannot be lost, because it is God's time.

Jesus' admonition that we guard against calling attention to ourselves in our practice of piety suggests that it matters *how* we do so to be his visible people. We don't become good simply by practising the good actions of a good person, there has to be some inner motivation that simply desires the good. There is a need, then, to free ourselves from self-interest, and from trying to impress others.

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Fasting is a discipline, but not dismal. True ascetics often deny that they are ascetics because they do not see their 'suffering' as particularly significant. 'So to be drawn into a life of fasting is to learn to live without what I assumed I could not live without' (*Matthew* / Stanley Hauerwas. – London : SCM, 2006. – p.80. – 978-0-334-04111-5).

Quotations

1

Holiness does not consist in doing extraordinary things. It consists in accepting, with a smile, what Jesus sends us. It consists in accepting and following the will of God.

Mother Teresa: in my own words / Mother Teresa of Calcutta. 1996

2

Holiness consists simply in doing God's will, and being just what God wants us to be.

St Thérèse de Lisieux, 1873–1897

3

The genuine deed of love is always a deed hidden to myself.

Discipleship / Dietrich Bonhoeffer. 1937

Related topics

For further study:

Lent; conversion; repentance; fasting; charity