

Ash Wednesday Homily (Isaiah 58:1-12)

Luke 9:26-36

Those who are ashamed of me and of my words, of them the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. But truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.'

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, 'Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah'—not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!' When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

<prayer>

On Sunday last I made the following points in my sermon:

We should not underestimate the effect that God may have on us, quite apart from the labours we may make for ourselves. Giving things up in Lent is not a matter of pure discipline, although great effort may be required. Lent is the removal of distraction, and a reminder of our correct priorities.

The gospel reading that day was the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain, as a fulfilment of what had first been seen in Moses. They were both shining, in their remarkable appearance. In both cases it was a work of God in them, **to be seen by others**. That idea of others is important to bear in mind this evening.

During this Lent we may fast in some way – that is to give up something for the season. I will too. **But will I do that as a test of myself, to see if I can, and so God can see that I can?** Should that be a demonstration to God of my humility and ability to meet his expectations? Perhaps that can be an increase in righteousness, a slightly more holy version of me for those weeks before Easter. That would sound like the benefits of Lent for myself and my relationship with God. Maybe my Good Friday confessions will mean more?

These are not necessarily bad things in themselves, but in our Isaiah reading from chapter 58, the idea of fasting is seen **in a wider light than just a testing vow between ourselves and God**. So, it seems also in ancient Israel at the time of the Isaiah. In the way that prophet does, there are some austere words to help the Israelites know that their religious observances are not seen by God in their way they were hoping:

Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins.
Yet day after day they seek me
and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that practised righteousness
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgements,
they delight to draw near to God.

Something about what they are behaving is not sitting well with God, despite their claimed religious endeavours. The context is a time of annual fasting in Israel, and their expectation of how God will respond in kind **to their efforts**. I wonder what they were fasting for, and for what they hoped would be a good response from God as a result? **Whatever it was, they were not getting it.** So, the prophet mocks them with their own injured question to God:

‘Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why do we humble ourselves, but you do not notice?’

There is no suggestion that their fast is pointless, or that they were failing to keep well to their vows. But God sees the bigger picture – **they make efforts in their relationship to God – but behind them is their relationship to others.** Literally, over their shoulders is the evidence of their attitude to everyone else. *Why do all this, and yet you allow all that?*

Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day, and oppress all your workers.

Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist.

So, their fast is derided by Isaiah:

Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.

Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself?

Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?

Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?

There is some sort of social injustice going on here in Israel – a mutually acceptable poor attitude to certain groups – perhaps slaves or foreigners, low pay or corruption, taxes, etc. More study of Isaiah will give us the full story and context of what was happening socially in Israel at that time, but in our short time this evening **it does help us to project the same message towards us and ourselves and our social context.**

So often the sins we confess are in relation to others. Yes, we might have particular people in mind, and our particular deeds against them, but do not leave out of your confession the sins of a society **from which we benefit.** Yet often we do as others are served passive injustice or are kept low by inert prejudice and inequality. **Individually, we have a portion of those collective sins.** The fact that we have few solutions and cannot easily change things is no reason not to confess our part in it.

Helpfully, Isaiah speaks of God's will about how fasting has effects beyond the individual:

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?

⁷Is 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?

⁸Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard.

⁹Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

Your *small* part in the sins of the whole world, can be helped by a *small* response from you. Have a think about that. If you deny yourselves in fasting, then you come nearer to those whose lives are often lived by involuntary denial. Will we not feel what they feel?

Sophie and I often eat out, it's a way to get time together in what can be the compressed life a clergyman. That is what we shall give up – the eating-out that is, not the time we spend together. Instead, we shall give to Haslemere Food Bank. **We give-up and we give out.** That may make a small difference, I hope so, but certainly it will help to me to implement the words I shared on Sunday, and I reminded us of this evening:

Giving things up in Lent is not a matter of pure discipline, although great effort may be required. Lent is the removal of distraction, and a reminder of our correct priorities.

I suggest again – these are the words for remember from this evening – **yes give up, but also give out.**

Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

Amen