



Sermon for Ash Wednesday 2023

@St Edmund's Church

(Readings: Isaiah 58: 1-12 and Matthew 6: 1-6 and 16-21)

When you give to the needy do not announce it with trumpets.

When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, standing on street corners.

“When you fast, do not look sombre as the hypocrites do,

Almsgiving, prayer, fasting – for each one, Jesus opens with the subject and tells us, very clearly, what bad practise looks like, and what good practise looks like.

Bad practise, from a Christ like perspective, is not just doing bad things; it's also doing good things for the wrong reasons – specifically for show. For the world's praise. Good practice, from a Christ-like perspective, is doing the very same good things, but for God. And for the sake of the world too. Of course. But not for the world's praise. Not for the world's praise.

And we see the true reward for good practice in another story – the parable of the pharisee and the tax collector.

Two men go to the temple and pray – one, a pharisee, so glad he's not like the other sinners, especially not like the tax collector – I pray, I fast, I give to charity, I don't commit adultery – all good stuff – but he's full of himself isn't he.

In the words of the old song,

O Lord it's hard to be humble when you're perfect in every way,

Could have been written for that Pharisee.

Look at me. How virtuous I am.

Then the tax collector – head down, yeah, don't look at me. Please don't look me. If you look at me, God, you will see me. And I couldn't stand that. Just have mercy on me.

And what does Jesus say in that story?

I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

This is not just about giving, about praying, self-denial. About the good we do – and it is good - It's about how we walk with God. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be.

Lent brings us back to that big question – and we should probably ask it more often. Who is at the centre, the core of my existence – is it money? or praise? Or is it me? Am I the centre of my own universe? Or is it God?

What or who is my treasure? Human affirmation, or God's delight?

Again, the simple and beautiful story of the widow's mite.

Jesus is at the temple, and he sees a rich man rock up and put in a significant amount of money in the coffers. Then he sees a widow, who would have next to nothing and certainly could spare nothing, give two small coins. And Jesus praises her for giving more than the rich man.

It wasn't actually about the money – it was about the attitude - the rich man gives to honour himself – look at me - the widow gives to honour God. Don't look at me. She sneaks in – but Jesus sees her.

It is the difference between being self-centred and God centred.

It could have been the rich man giving quietly, unobtrusively, and the widow saying hey, look at little old me, poor, downtrodden me, look how generous I am. Then her giving, not the rich man's, would have been self-serving. It's about the attitude. It's about the state and direction of the heart. Always.

Are we God-centred or self-centred. Not just selfish – but self-centred? It's an existential question.

The pharisee, the rich man, the one praying on street corners, fasting with an ashen look, for all of their outward piety, they are or may be self-centred. Look at me. I am the

centre of this performance. The tax collector, the widow, the one praying in their room, washing their face before fasting, they are God-centred. Don't look at me. Because this is not about me.

We know we live in a self-centred culture. In that literal sense. People are famous for being famous. That's it really. Or so it seems. People want people to know who they are, what they do, and why – even to the point, have you seen them, facebook posts showing people feeding a homeless person. Really, where's the respect for a homeless person if we're posting videos of ourselves feeding them? In the immortal words of Nike, just do it!

There's a serious malaise here - because so often people think without that affirmation, without that attention, without the facebook likes, somehow, they aren't good enough. And so, they end up living on the outside. Trying to impress a world that can only see the outside.- looking for and needing the affirmation of others. Which is not living at all. Or at least it's living only in the world of appearances. If that's our treasure, where our heart is, it's life span is short.

Praying in public can be the right thing. We need that witness.

I remember Julia praying here every day and it was real – and seeing her pray here, in this place, meant a lot to me. Because she was reminding me and the rest of us that St Edmund's is first and foremost a church. Her prayer was public, but her heart was directed on God. And it was a treasure – a treasure she shared with everyone who walked past. Always, the intention matters.

It is all about being God-centred, God focused.

In Isaiah they are not God centred – and that is the problem.

They ask me for just decisions
and seem eager for God to come near them.

³ 'Why have we fasted,' they say,
'and you have not seen it?

Why have we humbled ourselves,
and you have not noticed?'

Come on God – give us a like. Else what's the point?

They are living on the outside – our culture lives on the outside. Its treasure is in the affirmation of others - and where its treasure is, its heart is. That's quite sad.

We need to recalibrate – as individuals, as a society.

Enter the season of Lent. Lent is a time to draw away from that fake praise, a time to ask where our treasure is, a time to work out what it is that is enabling our journey with God and what is making it harder.

Lent is a time to reorientate the heart.

To remind ourselves who and where our treasure is. Lent is or can be a time to reorder our priorities. To reorientate the heart, to remember where, as Christians, our treasure really is, a time to put God back at the centre where God belongs. To put first.

Our lives are filled up with busyness, aren't they, with stuff, sometimes material stuff, often in fact, but also with all manner of things, of feelings, patterns of behaving, habits, that have become unhealthy, and they can become a wall between us and God. God will not enter our heart without our consent – but God will call. What if God is longing to draw close and we can't let him because, through the noise and clutter of our twenty first century lives, we can't hear that still small voice.

Lent is a time to consider all that comes between us and God, what is bringing me closer to God, what is pulling me away? They are tough questions, and they need honest answers. –

As James says,

'Come close to God, and God will come close to you'.

God is never more than an arm's length away because that is as far as we can keep God.

Last year we picked up our palm crosses and they reminded us, they do remind us, that success and failure look very different to the world and to God. We may or may not succeed by human standards; we may or may not be rich by human measures; but we know that such success and failure is temporary anyway; the ash reminds us that what is purely human, purely of the self, cannot and will not last. Good or bad.

From dust we came, to dust we shall return.

We are called to walk in the mystery of God's love, to let God show us what that looks and feels like, to let God draw as close as we can stand and show us who we really are. And to hold lightly to anything that prevents or inhibits that closeness. To loosen our grip on worldly values and worldly praise. And worldly condemnation.

Someone sent me this today – and though it didn't seem relevant to this sermon. Then it did.. Because we put up boundaries and keep God in his place for a reason. Maybe because, like the tax collector, we fear being seen.

So, hear this.

Just remember

We have all done unforgivable things

We have all wanted to punch a wall

We have all made someone cry

We have all let someone, including God, down.

We have all told a lie.

We have all stayed up late over-thinking.

But we are all human; and we are all trying to do better than we did yesterday.

God knows we are trying.

God doesn't want us to hide. God doesn't want us to feel condemned.

God wants only to be our treasure. Because where our treasure is there our heart will be.

Amen

