



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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Wednesday, February 17, 2010
Ash Wednesday

Solemn Liturgy of Ash Wednesday
at 12:10pm and 5:30pm

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Victor Lee Austin, Ph.D.
on
Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

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WHY DOES JESUS SAY TO BE GOOD IN SECRET?

Purity of focus, it seems to me, is what Ash Wednesday offers us. Although the music here at Saint Thomas is sublime, there is (if you note carefully) less of it. Our liturgical ceremonial is a bit more austere. In various ways today, we are paring back, shedding a little fat, hunkering down closer to the core of things.

The weeks of Lent now beckon us towards greater purity of focus. The church suggests three practices: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. At least in an immediate sense, it is pretty clear what we are called to do. Almsgiving is sharing one's goods with the poor. Prayer is communication with God. And fasting is self-denial with regard to food. The invitation is to take on a small dose in each of these categories. Give away a bit of your goods in these weeks to come. Pray a bit more. Eat a bit less.

We cannot be serious Christians without undertaking these disciplines (almsgiving, prayer, fasting). Christianity is not a spiritual religion, but material. We use water in the sacrament of joining. We use bread and wine in the sacrament of nourishing. We use oil in the sacrament of healing. And we proclaim that our ultimate destiny is to enjoy the life of God in a resurrected body. So Christianity, as a material religion, requires giving of our substance, not just nice thoughts about the poor; time spent speaking with God, not just good ideas about God; and discipline with regard to food, not just "spiritual fasting." (Spiritual fasting is when you have your chocolate cake and eat it too.)

But almsgiving, prayer, and fasting are not uniquely Christian practices. Jesus takes it for granted that the people he is speaking to already do these things. What does he say? "*When* you give alms" (not "*if*"), "*when* you pray," "*when* you fast"—what? "You must not be like the hypocrites." And what is Jesus' prescription for avoiding being like the hypocrites? It is to *restrict* religious practices. Let me emphasize the point, for it is odd in terms of natural religion. At the center of Jesus' teaching (this lenten invitation to a purity of focus) there is the instruction to curtail religious practices. Gone are the trumpets that announce the giving of alms. Gone are the long eloquent prayers performed in public. Gone are the facial disfigurements that bring the world's praise to a person who is seen to be fasting.

Here is an apparent quandary. On the one hand, Ash Wednesday is the trumpet call that we heard summoned by the prophet Joel to take up these disciplines of almsgiving,

prayer, and fasting. But in Jesus' own words, we are instructed to curtail those very practices, for the sake of purity (the avoidance of hypocrisy).

You see, Jesus says, hypocrites have already received their reward. They gave alms in order to be seen by people and receive praise. They were seen and they got it. They prayed on street corners in eloquent long-winded prayers, not to talk to God, but in order to be seen as praying. And they disfigured their faces, not in order to fast, but in order to be seen as fasting. And they were very much seen, and that being seen was their reward.

But God, Jesus says, "sees in secret." So if you want to do these things sincerely, then you do not need to do them in public. If you really want to help the poor, you don't have to be seen doing it. If you really want to talk with God, you don't need to be famous for doing so. And if you are fasting for the right reason, the world does not need to know that you are fasting.

It seems to me that what Jesus says is unassailably true. At least, I have known very few people who were satisfied with surface appearances. Would you rather have an employee who was working, or one who looked like he was? Would you rather have a doctor who really knows what she's about, or one who has the appearance of knowledge? And suppose you knew you would die this coming Christmas: would you spend the time between now and then doing good, or trying to build up the appearance of doing good?

So, I say, I think these questions are rather easily answered. The catch is, they are hard to live by. For it is not that we have two states to choose from: having real goodness that no one knows about, and having the appearance without the reality of goodness. There are obviously other possibilities: being a scumbag and known as such, for one, and for another, being good and known as such. Why shouldn't we want to be good and also to be known as such? Why does Jesus emphasize: give alms, pray, fast—*in secret*?

It is because publicity (or fame) is an awful danger for fallen human beings like you and me. As soon as any of us is known for some element of goodness, a little bit of the wrong kind of self-inflation slithers into the picture. We can't help it. The fame of being good, even among just a few friends, is like a drug—and we come to care more about being known as good (having another dose of the drug of fame) than we care about goodness itself. I say, we can't help it, but we can train ourselves against it. Secrecy is important, not because it is the ultimate state of things, but because it prepares us for the final transparency that comes with the presence of God. What is secret now, good as well as bad, will be revealed then in complete truth, without distortion.

And finally, who is it who sees truthfully now in secret? "Your Father," Jesus says. Not a generic "god," but the Father to whom we can pray—in a prayer, note, that is short and plain. "Our Father who art in heaven." Upon this Father our lives can find pure focus. What does that focus look like? Daily bread. Forgiveness. Deliverance through trials. Christians move religious practices into the secret realm (but they are still material practices—it is a mistake to think of this as a move into "spirituality"): Christians move religious practices into secret because we want to purify our lives, so that our lives are more completely focused on our Father, who is in heaven.