



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, OBE, DD, *Rector*
John Scott, LVO, D. Mus., *Organist and Director of Music*
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Wednesday, March 1, 2006
Ash Wednesday

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

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Victor Lee Austin
on
Matthew 6:1-6,16-21
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“LAY UP FOR YOURSELVES TREASURES IN HEAVEN”

This is the day that with all the solemnity we can muster, and with all the seriousness we can bring to bear, we turn our attention from the close-cropped frame of daily life to the panoramic view: the Big Picture. Our liturgy puts us in solidarity with our first parents: given paradise, they chose to ruin it; given communion with the Lord, they chose the petty isolation of the shriveled soul. So he blessed them with the self-awareness of finitude, as they set out from the garden (and we went with them): *Remember, O man, that dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.* There they are, at one end of this great wide-angle shot, and somewhere towards the other end, as we look at it today, is a place called heaven, described by our Lord as a place where moth and rust do not consume and where thieves break not in and steal, a place where, his voice urges us, we might lay up our treasures. It is on both ends of the picture the voice of God: you are dust, mortal, the voice says, you will die; remember this; and on the other, there is a place where treasure endures, does not corrupt, does not cause worry, needs no attention. The first was the attempt to snatch the treasure to ourselves, to keep it for us; the other is the soothing true message that treasures need not be snatched, and placed rightly will go on for ever.

In the first scene the calamity involved a tree. I do not know if you can see it; it is perhaps just outside our frame of view. But a bit shy of the other end of this picture we see another tree, prepared for a man who will hang on it, there where his life will expire. The heaven where we may lay up treasure is on the far side of this tree.

In the middle of the great panorama that is held before us today we find a number of subtle details, and they may be beyond my ability to describe clearly. I think there is one section where people are gathered around the Lord; he is seated, and he is teaching them. We know the words of his teaching. He is encouraging his people to give alms and to pray and to fast. These are practices which should mark their lives. But the subtlety—and thus our difficulty—comes from this: in each case, he tells them to do the deed secretly. They are not to give away money in public ways, in order to seek the honor of other people; but their almsgiving is to be in secret. They are not to pray with a proud heart, but quietly and not making a fuss about it. They are not to fast in order to receive the praises of men, but in order to receive the praise of God. As we listen to his teaching, it comes home to us that a great problem we human beings have is our ego. Having snatched at the treasures of paradise, we have lost our right relationship with God, and so in the place where God ought to be each of us has constructed a great big Me. I have become God! I am the benefactor known throughout this city for his almsgiving! I am the spiritual man known by all for his powerful prayers! I am the completely self-controlled man able to inflict upon my body heavy-duty fasting!

Comes the quiet voice: *Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.*

So do it in secret, he says. Chip away a bit of your monumental egoism. Write a check and mail it off in a plain envelope; don't expect any recognition. Help someone who can't return the favor—and who might not even say thanks. Try to do some real praying. That takes humility. You might need to get down on your knees—but in a place where no one can see you.

Thus does he teach. I can see him there, in the middle of the panoramic view, sitting amidst his students, but I can't see them when they go off to do what he has said. How do you see a good deed done in secret? With what lines do you draw it? There might be hints, suggestions, intimations, but they are beyond my skill.

Then I hear him speaking. *Your father*, he says quietly—did you hear that pronoun? *Your father, who sees in secret, will reward you.* This introduces a new distinction. Not only public and proud and superficial *versus* secret and humble and genuine, but present *versus* future. The proud have already *received their reward*, but the state of those who follow Jesus, who work in humble anonymity, those who give alms and pray and fast and nobody knows about it—we correct our language: God knows about it, and that is enough. He *sees in secret*, and he *will reward you*.

Ponder with me, if you will, the character of that reward, the destiny that is at the edge of our panorama today, the treasures that last. It was perhaps easier for Jesus' first disciples to understand the character of that reward than it is for us. For in the ancient languages the positive words had to do with contemplation, with seeing the truth, with that kind of looking that intends nothing more than enjoyment; whereas the negative words had to do with action, with making, with doing. So the word "school," Latin *schola*, Greek *σχολη*, means "leisure." Aristotle says "we engage in business in order to have leisure," but the Greek words are literally that we undertake the not-*σχολη* in order to undertake the *σχολη*. You find this also in Latin: the word for business, *negotium*, cognate "negotiation," that's the negative of *otium*, which is rest or leisure.¹

So the languages understood the right ordering of things: work is oriented towards what was called leisure. We of course have it just backwards. We have vacations and days off so that we can come back to work refreshed. And when we have time on our hands, that is to say, when we are "at leisure," we tend to be a bit embarrassed about it, and know not what to do with ourselves.

True leisure is the contemplation and enjoyment of the good, of what is truly and only good, and that is God alone. This life has an orientation, not only a history but a forward-projection, a goal where the important thing is not what a person *does* but what she *is*, or perhaps we should say, who she is with!

I told a few people that what I would be preaching on today was giving up work for Lent. One of them, a quick wit, said I could speak from experience (since "we all know clergymen only work on Sundays"). I took the point in the light spirit it was offered. But what a lot of us humans need to do, it seems to me, is not to give up chocolate or cigarettes or cream, but open up our visions, and break out of narrow conceptions of work and rest. We need to learn how to enjoy true leisure, the contemplation of what is good and true and beautiful, the greatest treasure, our Lord himself, and that is why he urges us today, remembering our mortality, to do good, loving, and pious things in secret.

¹These distinctions, and the following point, are drawn from Andrew Louth, "Theology, Contemplation and the University," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 17:1 (2004), pp. 71–73.