

Ash Wednesday Year B Isaiah 58 vv1 to 12

We hear Jesus say to us to beware of practicing our piety before others and yet, we will soon have ashes smudged across our foreheads in the shape of a cross – a public display of our piety. With Ash Wednesday comes an annual reminder, an annual caution that there is a danger of slipping into empty, outward displays of our piety in contrast to genuine, radical acts of piety. Do not practice your piety before others, Jesus cautions, when your purpose is to be seen being pious.

Through the prophet Isaiah, God comes down hard – unmistakably hard – on the hollowed out, meaningless ritual acts of faith practiced by the Israelites...meaningless ritual acts of faith because the acts do not align with their hearts and they do not align with their actions in day-to-day life outside of worship.

“Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion...their sins,” (Is.58:1). This is God’s command to hold up the brokenness, the wrongness of the people, to hold it up for all to see, call attention to it, shine a light on it. That is the only way to do something about it, the only way to fix it.

For a brief moment, the people sound very faithful: Day after day they seek me, and delight to know my ways, God says. But the description of the people immediately turns sour: as if they practiced righteousness, as if they followed my laws. God’s message? They don’t. They do not practice righteousness. They do not follow God’s laws. The problem? To outward appearances, they look like they do. The even bigger problem? They think that’s all that needs to happen.

“Why do we fast,” they ask of God, “and you don’t see us fasting?” “Why do we humble ourselves and you don’t notice?” If they were truly humble, God *would* notice. The problem, God bluntly tells them, is that they are fasting for their own gain. They want God to lavish his love and abundant generosity on them but they do not lavish love and abundant generosity on others, nor do they even want to. They love God and others for the one hour spent in worship and then go back to their hurtful, selfish ways the rest of the time.

The ritual act of piety that God particularly calls attention to is fasting. Since Lent is a traditional time for at least some fasting among Christians, it is timely for us to hear more about it this evening. Fasting, depriving our bodies of food, says Pastor John Piper, is “a physical exclamation point at the end of the sentences: ‘I need you! I want you! ...You are my treasure! I want more of you!’ ... The heart of it is longing” he continues. “We are putting our stomach where our heart is to give added intensity and expressiveness to our ache for Jesus” (at desiringgod.org). Fasting is a way to focus our minds and bodies on God so that we can become closer to God. Our worship and our prayer and our scripture study is all meant to bring us closer to God, to develop a stronger, deeper relationship by getting to know God and God’s ways better and better.

The people, however, are simply performing their acts of worship and prayer – which includes fasting – to fulfill their obligation dictated by societal pressure. They are doing it to look good. God very bluntly tells them that, if they truly meant what they were praying, truly praised and adored him, then they wouldn’t be cold-hearted, conniving, and greedy when they weren’t praying and worshiping. True love of God would be showing through every day and in every way they were living. They would be working to bring equality and justice to their society, God

says. They would be peaceful, kind, and generous – feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, giving necessities of life to people in need.

God needs to be present in those actions too. God must be at the heart of all that we do. Thinking on our motivation, self-reflecting regularly is a good thing, possibly an eternal life-saving thing. Why are we doing what we do? Is it to be seen by others as Jesus warns against today? Would we still give as much to the church and to other charities if we would not get a tax receipt? The people who share with me the privilege and responsibility of serving the parish by serving on Parish Council know of my recent distressing “aha moment” and time of self-reflection: the kingdom of God is here, coexisting with the kingdoms of this world. We are continuously faced with the choice to live in God’s kingdom or not. I always wondered how people could turn down the wonderful perfection of life in God’s kingdom but, I realized, for many people, turning God down would simply mean continuing to live as they are. For a lot of people, the glamour and greed, the wealth and the fame that taunts and tantalizes from just out of reach is more alluring than the love and peace of God’s kingdom because that love and that peace require selflessness. Selflessness is not promoted, is not valued by our society and so we end up holding onto worthless things that are valued by society.

As I told Parish Council members that night, there are monkeys in the Philippines hunted in a very interesting manner. Hunters cut a small hole in a coconut, empty it out and then put a few stones in the bottom. The monkeys shake the coconut and are curious about what they hear rattling around. They reach in and grasp the stones but then are unable to get their hand back out through the small hole. Reluctant to let go of what’s inside in case it’s valuable, the monkeys are easily caught and killed by the hunters. What worthless stones in the coconut are we

grasping onto that have us snared and may lead to losing the life offered to us by God? “Turn my eyes from watching what is worthless; Give me life in your ways” (Psalm 119:37). It’s the saying on the magnet I made for everyone two Christmases ago. “Turn my eyes from watching what is worthless; Give me life in your ways.”

“Then,” God assures us, “Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing [-your salvation-] shall spring up quickly.” Very interestingly, God specifically points out behaviours among the worshippers themselves as they interact with each other that also must be eradicated: power struggles, manipulation, the pointing of fingers, negative talk, gossip about other members. When these are eliminated, then I will answer you, God says. Very clearly God is saying, piety is not just a me and you thing, it is not just between God and the individual; it’s a you and everybody else thing. Extending God’s love and abundant generosity to those beside us and to those beyond these walls will transform us: Our light shall rise in the darkness and our gloom be like the noonday, we are told. God will guide us and satisfy our needs; we shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

Lent is the opportunity given to us each year – the precious opportunity – to think about what we are doing, why we do what we do, and to turn, with renewed vigour and love, to turn our gaze on God. Through prayer, and worship, and study during Lent and beyond, we can clear hearts and minds of stumbling blocks, right any wrong motivations, and draw closer to God and...closer to the fulfillment of God’s kingdom on earth as in heaven.