

Reflection for Wednesday June 17

Collect for the Second Sunday after Pentecost

Lord,
we beseech you to keep your family, the Church, in continual godliness,
that through your protection it may be free from all adversities,
and devoutly given to serve you in good works,
to the glory of your name;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

⁶ ‘Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

² ‘So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³ But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁵ ‘And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

¹⁶ ‘And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Reflection;

Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them warns our Gospel, and here I stand, in front of a camera, recording this for public viewing!

Online worship has become a reality for many of us as we attempt to stay connected to our communities in this time of social isolation. The very public nature of this kind of prayer has certainly challenged me; praying in front of a camera and with an unknown audience feels public in a way that our corporate prayer does not. So, what does this Gospel passage have to say to us?

The verses we have just heard are part of Jesus’ *Sermon on the Mount*. The translation I read today says, *beware of practising your piety before others* but perhaps a better translation is *beware of practising your righteousness before others*. The righteousness that is required to enter the kingdom of heaven is the subject of Jesus’ entire sermon and the take home message is that righteousness will be rewarded by God, not by people.

The motivation behind our actions is important. We should not be self-seeking in the things we do. Matthew explores charitable giving, prayer and fasting and the message is the same for all three; these are not to be done in order to draw attention to one’s self. Our focus should be on serving God and building up the kingdom of heaven; that is true righteousness.

Charitable giving (verses 2-4)

It seems that much of the charitable giving in Jesus' day was done for personal glory. Nothing has changed. Our churches, universities and other public institutions are full of the names of those who are being honoured by people for their generosity. Perhaps some of this is done in righteousness but the point of giving should never be to be seen as being generous. The Gospel message is that while society might be impressed by public philanthropy, God is not.

Prayer (verses 5-6)

When Jesus speaks about prayer being private, he is not, of course, condemning the corporate prayer of our worship. Once again, it is the attitude behind the prayer that is important. To pray together is an important part of our communal life and often there is more of a problem with people not feeling confident to pray in public than there is with people using the opportunity for their own glory.

However, the warning is still an important one for us to hear. Sometimes prayers are offered that seem to be directed, not so much to God, as to those in the congregation. Sometimes prayers appear to puff up the person praying by indicating that he/she has superior knowledge that they are sharing with the congregation, either of the details of the lives of others or of God's will for the congregation.

Today's reading from the lectionary skipped over verses 7 to 15 but they contain Jesus' teaching of the Lord's Prayer. This prayer provides us with the model of simplicity and humble petition that is how Jesus taught his disciples to pray and how we should shape our own. Prayer is for the purpose of communicating with God and experiencing God's presence. To pray for any other reason is not to pray at all.

Fasting (verses 16-18)

Fasting is a practice that has largely fallen off the agenda for most Christians. Interesting modern takes on fasting might include special diets that people choose to follow for ethical reasons or perhaps going without food in order to raise money for a charity, for instance participating in the 40 Hour Famine. In either case, some people will do this privately and because of the strength of their convictions, focussing on the cause rather than their own image, whereas others will trumpet their participation to all and sundry for the purpose of portraying themselves to the world in a particular light.

Jesus teaches that in whatever we do, it is the attitude of our hearts that matters. We are to come before God with humble hearts, focussed on love and service. Our loving worship of God is its own reward. As we focus on God, we draw closer to God, even in the midst of our struggles and failures. It is only in this way that we can truly serve the world that God loves, and it is in this way that God, who sees the secrets of our hearts, blesses us.

The Lord be with you.