

ASH WEDNESDAY

February 17

READING:

6 “Watch out! Don’t do your good deeds publicly, to be admired by others, for you will lose the reward from your Father in heaven. 2 When you give to someone in need, don’t do as the hypocrites do—blowing trumpets in the synagogues and streets to call attention to their acts of charity! I tell you the truth, they have received all the reward they will ever get. 3 But when you give to someone in need, don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. 4 Give your gifts in private, and your Father, who sees everything, will reward you. 5 “When you pray, don’t be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them. I tell you the truth, that is all the reward they will ever get. 6 But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

16 And when you fast, don’t make it obvious, as the hypocrites do, for they try to look miserable and disheveled so people will admire them for their fasting. I tell you the truth, that is the only reward they will ever get. 17 But when you fast, comb your hair and wash your face. 18 Then no one will notice that you are fasting, except your Father, who knows what you do in private. And your Father, who sees everything, will reward you. 19 “Don’t store up treasures here on earth, where moths eat them and rust destroys them, and where thieves break in and steal. 20 Store your treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal. 21 Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be.

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

REFLECTION:

Over the past year, as I’ve been given the opportunity to write these emails, I have spent a lot of time reading my Bible, trying to understand it in what I call “plainspeak”. Over the course of my adult life, I have been struck by the language we Christians use that we take for granted. But even more subtle than that is the Biblical narrative that we take for granted. We read the Bible as about them, not us, and in doing so, we are in danger of failing to see the sheer upside downness of so much of what Christ did and said. I try to imagine modern day equivalents of the apostles and the events described within the New Testament, knowing that human character hasn’t really changed much since the advent of time. They looked for meaning and understanding; they had coping strategies for the things that caused them fear and anxiety; they laughed and wept their way through life, just as we do today. I also look for modern day equivalents for those whom Jesus had his harshest rebukes; with whom he did not mince his words. And while I think his apostles exacerbated him, he was most scathing of the pharisees and the religious elite...those steeped in [Biblical] knowledge, who knew all the right words and lingo, and who were old pros, having grown up in [Christian] homes with rich religious heritages. And the question I ask myself, time and again, is “where do I fit in within these pages?”

I encapsulated the above words because the religious elite in Jesus’ time were Jewish, steeped in the Torah and the laws of Moses. But, if we are honest with ourselves, we are them and they are us. And therefore, the words in this reading, just like all the other words Jesus directed towards and about this particular group of people are words that we need to take to heart.

Indeed, we are also the Peters and the Johns, the Thomas and the Matthews. We don’t see what’s in front of us, we are fickle, we jostle for Jesus’ favour, and in spite of overwhelming evidence and

forewarning, we are shocked when things don't turn out as we had hoped or planned. We're broken and completely human. But as folks with a heritage, we can also be complacent, certain, arrogant, and willfully blind. We don't want our worlds turned upside, we don't want to be challenged, we want our comfort and our status, our success, to remain untouched and obvious. We've read this text a thousand times; we know what it says and who it's talking about (not us, obviously). And frankly, whatever we don't understand, we'll simply discount as ancient, irrelevant, and not in keeping with our "modern" sensibilities...since we now know better, we can now do better.

Rather than issue a reminder over the course of Lent, I'll issue challenges this year instead. Let's be brutally honest with ourselves as to where our treasure is. This is not meant to be guilt-inducing or preachy. But it's meant to push us to recognize who we are in this story so that when we read Christ's words, we see them in "plain speak"; meant for us, to truly transform us, just as they did for that rag tag group of broken people who chose to listen and to follow him over two millennia ago.

CHALLENGE:

Sit with yourself, take an inventory of your life; where do you spend all your time and with whom? Where does your money go? If you give to the church, great, but where does the rest of it go? Where do your warmest words go and your harshest words? Are you empty? Are you full? Will you be empty or full tomorrow? a year from now? five years from now? What if it all was taken from you? Would you be full or empty? If you lost your job, your house, your wife or your child? Your sanity, your memory, your ability to care for yourself?