

Ash Wednesday: February 26th 2020

**“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”
(Matthew 6:21)**

Readings: Isaiah 58:1-12 and Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

Prayer

“I have seen the sun break through
to illuminate a small field
for a while, and gone my way
and forgotten it. But that was the pearl
of great price, the one field that had
the treasure in it.”

Driving down the road from Silverton I will occasionally notice, with great pleasure, a field illuminated briefly on the Raddon Hills by the sun shining through the clouds. R.S. Thomas in his poem “The Bright Field” writes of such a vision, a field highlighted in the landscape, as if the sun was picking it out deliberately. This field, which the poet observes and then forgets, so easily done, was the one field that held a pearl of great price, a treasure. Thomas compares it to a missed opportunity in life, to perhaps encounter a life changing event, a glimpse of God. We are so often caught up in the business of daily life, the treadmill of routine, which too often will focus on ourselves rather than God. Lent presents a time to turn aside from the material concerns of living in order to find God’s treasure, that pearl of great price. We need to stop, get off the treadmill, look and perhaps re-discover God’s glory.

In this evening’s Gospel Jesus, at the heart of his sermon on the mount and for us, at the beginning of Lent, gives us some challenging instructions on how such treasure might be found. We are to pray, to give alms and to fast. Each of these instructions has

an important condition - it must be done in secret. Do not call attention to yourself when praying by showing an outward piety which conceals an inner pride. Do not blow your own trumpet to announce the quantity and quality of your giving to charities, the Church or other people. Do not let any one know you are fasting by continually telling people so as to receive their praise and wonder at your self denial. No, pray in private to your Father in Heaven; when you give alms, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing; ensure your fasting is seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret. The message is clear. The outward appearance must be matched by the inner reality. If these religious duties are done with an eye on the audience, they become rotten at the core.

In a moment we will receive a sign of the cross on our foreheads made from the ashes of last year's palm crosses. So here we are in a public place which we will leave with a very public mark on our foreheads. Hardly a secret act! Hardly private! But Jesus is focussing not so much on what we do, but why we do it. If you are to view a cross on your forehead made from ashes as a mark of religious achievement, you've got it wrong. The act is accompanied by the words, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return" echoing the creation narrative in Genesis which describes God forming Adam "from the dust of the ground." It's a timely reminder that we were made by God, who loves all his creation, and we will return to God. All our actions, whether fasting, praying, giving alms, worshipping here this evening we do, not so much to be noticed, as to be closer to the God who loves us.

St. Therese of Lisieux wrote:

"You know well enough that our Lord does not look so much at the greatness of our actions, not even at their difficulty, but at the love with which we do them."

In 1998 I played the role of the Common man in Robert Bolt's play "A Man for All Seasons". My wife Avril directed this play which

dramatises the conflict between King Henry VIII and his Chancellor Thomas More. In the first scene, as a steward, I introduce the audience to both Thomas More and a young man Richard Rich, who was played by Nathan Currie, Mollie's son. Richard has come to court hoping to find from Thomas a position of wealth, privilege and power. He has waited a long time to see Thomas More, who offers him the role of a teacher. Thomas says to him, "You'd be a fine teacher. Perhaps, a great one." "And if I was," Richard replies, "who would know?"

Thomas says, "You, your pupils, your friends, God. Not a bad public, that....Oh, and a quiet life." But that wasn't enough for Richard Rich. He thought only of himself: his position, his power, his honour.

Learning to live in the presence of the living God, learning to do everything for him and him alone, learning to show love in all our actions are difficult asks. Losing our overpowering sense of self and letting go of living our lives seeking the attention and approval of others, is a great treasure so difficult to find. Haven't there been times when we desperately wanted and worked hard for the recognition of others? When have we lost ourselves to the opinion of others? Haven't we all spent time wondering what others are saying and thinking about us, wondering what they see when they look at us? Our Lenten discipline is to let go of living our lives before others in order to be seen by them for what we are - children of God. So when we leave here do not wash off the ashes, but rub them in, rub them deep into our being. They are our place in life.

This Lent our fast, as Isaiah reminds us, is to share our bread with the hungry, bring the homeless poor into our homes, clothe the naked, and support our families. To re-treasure people and relationships, to re-treasure justice and compassion, to re-treasure love, forgiveness, hope and beauty. These are the treasures of heaven, here on Earth which "neither moth nor rust consume" and "thieves do not break in and steal." If only we can stop, leave the

treadmill, and keep our eyes firmly fixed on God, perhaps we'll find that pearl in the field, perhaps we'll see that glimpse of God. May our Lent reap many of God's treasures.

Bill Pattinson

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