

Sermon on Wednesday 17 June 2020

by Rev. Bill Church

(Reading: Matthew 6. 1-6, 16-18)

Two things strike me about this passage from St Matthew's Gospel, part of the Sermon on the Mount.

The first is that Jesus had a sense of humour.

You can imagine the crowd laughing outright at the idea of a man who sent out trumpeters ahead of him when he was taking round a food parcel; or at the thought of a man who rubbed ashes on his face to make sure people knew he was fasting.

And even if they did not themselves know of anybody being quite so extreme, they would certainly be aware of people who made very sure that everybody knew how charitable they were, or how hard and often they made their devotions, or how self-denying they were.

Nowadays there is not much public kudos to be had from prayerfulness or fasting. But there is plenty of virtue signalling; a new and annoying word for an old and annoying habit.

Celebrities do it; corporations do it; public bodies do it; churches do it. All in response to the most recently

revealed injustice or outrage or threat, and all too often this overshadows the last-but-one injustice, outrage or threat, all too often without any long-lasting commitment.

As the Gospel says – they have their reward, if only by avoiding online disapproval.

But how much better if they all - we all - with steadfastness and stamina, quietly or loudly as the case requires, kept on with, persevered with and delivered well-chosen and thought-through commitments.

The second thing that strikes me is – Jesus assumes that his hearers will pray, will give alms and will fast. He does not say IF you give alms, IF you pray, IF you fast; He says WHEN you give alms, WHEN you pray, WHEN you fast.

Not many preachers today could safely assume that all their hearers will regularly give alms (or whatever the modern equivalent is), or pray privately as well as publicly, or fast (or whatever the modern equivalent is).

One of Katie Seaton's Thoughts for the Day included a thought that the Parable of the Talents should be read so that 'talents' embrace all advantages and privileges that we enjoy, so that they should be used well rather than just squirrelled away; which implies that 'giving

alms' embraces using all the advantages we enjoy as well as available cash, for a wider common good, and as a holy obligation, not as a basis for self-advertisement.

That is hardly a revolutionary idea, but it is one that needs refreshment and reinforcement in every generation.

In normal times, much prayer is communal and includes set prayers. Other prayers, like Jonah's from the belly of the fish, are desperate, immediate and unplanned, but with confidence that prayer will be heard.

Private prayer (though I am sure that no prayer is truly private, after all it necessarily includes God and its effects can be wide; maybe 'hidden' is a better word); hidden prayer can be helped by using set prayers from communal worship, learned by heart (and 'by heart' is revealing. Such prayers should lie on the heart not just in the head).

Jesus warns against 'vain repetitions', but saying a well-known prayer and then saying, and thinking, it again, clause by clause, is a good discipline.

If you hear about fasting nowadays it is quite likely to be part of a new diet which will drive out supposed toxins, clear your skin and improve your sex drive, which is emphatically not what I am talking about.

In the time of the Bible, fasting was linked to repentance (see Jonah 3, where the King of Nineveh orders a fast for men and beasts!) as Lent still is linked with repentance. Fasting or abstinence is a good way to remind ourselves about what is really essential and what we can do without; and is a sort of solidarity with those who never have enough; and also, which I think was not part of biblical fasting, saves money, which can be used instead for giving alms – but without sounding trumpets at the street corners.