

Ash Wednesday  
14/2/2016

Mark the Evangelist

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17  
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-20

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*“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.”*

That is, when it comes to the place in your life where the things of God meets the things of the world, let that meeting be before God but unseen by the world.

Yet there is a strange tension between what Jesus says here and what has already been said. “...Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5.7)

On the one hand there is the call to an intentional public shining of a light before others.

On the other, there is Jesus’ warning here and in the sections of the text which follow: do not exercise your charity towards the needy in a public way; do not pray in an ostentatious way; do not draw attention to your meeting of your religious obligations (*fasting, in particular*).

This is to say, then, that there is both a public and a non-public nature to being a disciple of this Jesus. But the critical – and surprising – thing is this: these are not two different things, as if sometimes we are being public and sometimes we are being private. The public appearance and the private hiddenness both occur in the *same* words and actions. The light shines for all to see *when* I withdraw to pray, *when* I am quiet about my charitable giving, *when* I cover up the fact that I am fasting.

To understand why this fairly subtle point is important, simply note how often we say to ourselves in the church today, “we prefer to show forth our faith by our actions rather than our words”. How does this sit with Jesus’ saying about *not* doing our good works in order to be seen? As we strive to show forth our faith by our actions rather than our words, do we not strive to be *seen* to be good?

Jesus pushes us past our actions, past even our *intentions*, to our *motivations*.

Christians are subject to an extraordinary moral temptation. This is not simply that we are tempted to do the wrong thing. Rather, we easily choose the *right* thing for the *wrong* reasons. The desire to be seen to be good is important for us not only that others might value us or our God more highly, but important also that we might value *ourselves* more highly. Jesus calls this letting the left hand know what the right hand is doing.

The problem is not doing the good thing. The problem is that we are *conscious* of this as a good work, having judged ourselves and our works as good. We are aware that it will be seen as a good thing by those who are looking on. To be *known* to be “good” – do we not desire this?

Of course, we must strive to do the good. It is assumed in our reading this evening that we *will* be giving out of our own resources to those in need. The question is simply the spirit in which this will be done.

Let the *goodness* of what we do be something which is hidden as such *to us*. In this way, even if no one else does, *we* at least can give glory to *God* for the good that we do, allowing our lives and our works to be hidden in the life and work of Christ. Just so does *God* shine forth as the author of all good works, and we will find freedom from anxiety about our own goodness.

“Do not judge others” – this is little more than modern political correctness.

“Do not judge yourselves” – this is the demand and the freedom of the gospel.

For the possibility of life beyond mere the goodness of our words and actions, thanks be to God. Amen.

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