

Wednesday 14 February 2024
Ash Wednesday

Liverpool Parish Church

NT: 2 Corinthians 5.20b-6.10

Gp: Matthew 6.1-6, 16-21

A significant amount of clergy time these days is, quite rightly, devoted to safeguarding. That is to say, in an environment where all are welcome, we have to take special care to ensure that the most vulnerable people in our communities – and children in particular – are safe. Central to this is the application we make for all staff and many volunteers to the Disclosure and Barring Service. The Church of England has a particularly poor record with safeguarding, and it continues to safeguard the institution over individuals, but the word ‘disclosure’ is absolutely key. The word itself implies that nothing should be secret. But this is obviously not the case either: everyone has secrets, and in fact everyone should be allowed to have secrets. In the world of safeguarding we can be absolutely clear about the things which are not allowed to be kept secret, but in other areas of our lives we often have some discretion. And that discretion is a challenge, because any choice is connected with motive.

The warnings in our Gospel reading today about almsgiving, prayer, and fasting – the classic disciplines of the penitent – are bound up with motive. They also remind us of the great conundrum of actions motivated by religion, which is whether it is possible to act in a disinterested way. I say actions motivated by religion on purpose, because they can be different from actions motivated by faith, which in turn is different from a different motivation which I shall come to in a moment. So, rather like Pascal’s wager, the behaviour condemned in the Gospel reading should perhaps not be seen as ‘showing off’ but it should be seen as adopting religion for the sake of reward. Pascal wrote that the rational person would adopt a faith in God – or at least the appearance of one – because if God exists then salvation is the prize, and if he doesn’t exist then it doesn’t matter anyway. There are many arguments against this, not least an epicurean rejection of religion for the pursuit of pleasure, but it does make us question whether we can ever have a disinterested motive. To take this to an extreme, even the actions undertaken in secret in the Bible, such as almsgiving or prayer in this case, are known to the individual and to God, and the conscious decision to act in a certain way is an engagement with the transactional nature of salvation implied by Pascal.

Is salvation transactional? Many would say that it is: if you fulfil the requirements of the teaching of our faith then surely you win salvation. This is where our reading from St Paul today is challenging. He wrote, “as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God.” Is this a smug rejoicing in righteousness, or is it a dispassionate account of what he has been through? To the sceptic, Paul appears to be standing and praying on a street corner.

This is religious motivation, but it is possible to act without motivation, and this is what we are called to do. Lent is about self-knowledge, but it is also about opening ourselves to God’s presence in our lives. Churches can help us in this with Lenten events, and I encourage you to join our Lent Quiet Morning in March. The opportunity of Lent is to set aside time to open ourselves to God’s presence with us. As we fill ourselves with God’s presence, we find not motivation, but impulse, and this is the spur to action. Paschal was wrong in believing that salvation can be bought through the adoption of religious practices, because salvation comes from allowing God to act through us. Prayer, fasting, and almsgiving are about selflessness, not intention.

Disclosure takes on a new meaning in this context. It is not about telling or showing people who we are. The intentional praying and almsgiving of the hypocrites in the Gospel reading are disclosing who we would like to be, or perhaps who we want to be seen to be. Instead disclosure should be about living our relationship with God, emptying the self, and acting on the impulse that is God rather than the impulse which is our desire. Disclosing who we really are is not a performance for others, or even for God, but for ourselves. This is Lent: not a performance or a challenge, but a time for revelation of God to ourselves, and ourselves to God. “Do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners.” Instead, be yourself, and try and catch yourself where you do stand and pray.

Fr Crispin Pailing