

**Sermon preached at Grace Epiphany Church, Philadelphia  
17 February 2010**

*Ash Wednesday: Ps 103:8-14; Isa 58:1-12;  
2 Cor 5:20b-6:10; Mt 6:1-6, 16-21*

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Today's gospel passage and the passage from the Old Testament give us two different kinds of advice on our practices of personal piety. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus tells us not to make a big show of our personal piety—our charity work, our prayer life, and our fasting and practices of self-denial. He tells us to engage in these practices in secret, away from the notice of others. Jesus is well aware that we can be driven by egotistical impulses in our pious practices. He knows—as we do, if we're being honest—that our egos get major strokes when we are publicly known as generous givers to the poor, or as people who pray or fast regularly. If I enjoy the strokes so much, pretty soon I can't be sure why I'm doing what I'm doing: is it really about growing closer to God or is it just about the strokes? The vanity and self-conceit that tempts all of us at one time or another can, in fact, pull us in the opposite direction from the spiritual goals that pious practices are meant to help us achieve.

Isaiah makes a different point, no less important. He is saying that our pious practices must be accompanied by a total life lived in righteous way. It does us no good to fast if we are going to oppress those who work for us, or if we are going to resort to violence as a way of dealing with our fellow human beings. Fasting—and by extension all our activities of personal piety—are in and of themselves insufficient to please God, unless they are accompanied by commitments and actions in the cause of justice. “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?”

In other words, Isaiah is telling us, without a commitment to justice, to helping the poor, the oppressed, and the hungry, all our practices of personal piety are just so many empty gestures. This is not how everyone understands our faith, however. There are people who say that as long as they “believe in Jesus,” (whatever they think that means), they are “saved.” They don't think it matters if in the rest of their lives they are complicit in the oppression of the poor; they don't connect their being “saved” with any kind of obligation to see that everyone has reasonable access to health care; as long as they stick to their routines of personal piety it doesn't matter what they do about inequality, racism, tyranny, or the huge gap between rich and poor. There are Christians who think that simply reading the Bible every day, or attending church regularly, gets a person on God's good side, regardless of whatever that person neglects to do for the poor, the hungry, the sick, and the naked. There are Christians who seem to think they only need to correctly identify the “bad” people they should condemn in order to be right with God, to give substance to their practices of personal piety.

It is clear that it doesn't work that way for Isaiah, and I would argue that it does not work that way for Jesus Christ, either. Jesus was in constant conflict with the religious authorities of his day because he thought they were promoting simple piety for piety's sake. That's why he is constantly criticizing the Pharisees and the scribes, calling them hypocrites. Like the prophets before him, he speaks to a society that he thinks is profoundly unjust, cruel, and oppressive. In fact, it is so unjust and cruel that it will wind up nailing him to a cross to die a humiliating death.

Beginning the season of Lent with Ash Wednesday, we are being asked to consider the sin in our lives and to adopt the pious practices, like fasting, that focus our minds and our hearts on that sin and on what we call repentance—turning around our lives, our minds, and our hearts, so that we no longer continue living in that sin. The second vow we make in our baptismal covenant is that we will, with God’s help, persevere in resisting evil, and whenever we fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord. The period of Lent reminds us that no matter how terrific we think things are going, there are always forces in our personal and public lives that draw us away from the knowledge of God. Lent is the time to look honestly at those forces and ask God’s help in resisting them.

We begin these pious practices today with the imposition of ashes on our heads to remind us of our mortality, to remind us that death will come to us all, and that we have only the time that we are living on this earth to do what we can to make things right—to transform the world that the prophets and Jesus saw, the world in which we still live, into a world that is just, compassionate, and loving. We each of us can only do a little piece of the great work that needs to be done, just the tiniest little piece. But do something we must, to make sure that our practices of personal piety reflect something substantial and real in our lives. To do nothing else but make great shows of personal piety flies in the face of what we are told in Scripture, in both the Old and the New Testaments.

Lent is the time to look honestly at whether our lives and our relationships are truly in synch with our practices of personal piety, whether we are doing good just so that we can look good to others, or doing good because we really care that the good and the right will win out in the end, really care that the kingdom of God becomes more visible in the broken world we live in. It’s a time for us to look at the totality of our lives and to see if we are living up to the fine words we hear and say and sing every Sunday. In other words, it’s a period of time for us to look inside and honestly ask ourselves whether we are walking the walk or just talking the talk. Lent is a time to be brutally honest with ourselves and to ask the tough questions that we can only answer in prayer, only in conversation with our heart’s truth and the God who sees into each of our hearts and knows the truth.

We share the same premise of that famous song: “Start by admitting from cradle to tomb it isn’t that long a stay.” But life is only a cabaret if you believe there’s nothing beyond the darkness, nothing beyond the evil and brokenness that surrounds us. Life is only a cabaret if you think that leaving a pretty corpse is the best you can do. Life is only a cabaret if you believe that life is in fact a meaningless void. If that’s what you truly believe in your heart of hearts (and Lent is a good time to find out what you truly believe), then Christian faith doesn’t have much to say that you’ll be interested in.

But if, for you, there is any meaning at all to the words repentance, redemption, and resurrection; any meaning at all to the words hope, justice, and love; any possibility at all for the light to shine through the darkness, then there’s work to do to get our lives in order. It isn’t that long a stay; there isn’t much time left. Let’s get honest. Let’s get serious. And let’s get busy.