

The Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ According to Matthew

Jesus said, "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. So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. "And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Please note the gospel reading above where Jesus says, "Beware of practicing your piety before others."

That means that whatever Lenten discipline we have chosen, we are not allowed to mention it to anyone. Not to anyone. Not to our family members, not to friends and especially not to unsuspecting strangers.

We are not allowed to complain or commiserate with anyone about giving up something or taking on something. We just do it and God is aware.

Too often Christians act as though they are trying to prove their personal holiness to God and to others through their Lenten devotions. That is not a good thing. In fact, that in and of itself is sinful because it denies that fact that Jesus has already done all the sufficient good works for our salvation. When we do Lenten (or for that matter any) disciplines or good works, we are not doing them for God. We are doing them for our neighbors. When we act as though we are doing the works to impress God our neighbors are not impressed. They are more likely to see us as hypocrites or Pharisees. Or worse they may think that we believe we are better than them. The fact is that we are sinners just like

they are. We may have different sins but we are sinners. We can't love our neighbor if we look down on our neighbor.

I am very serious when I say that our Lenten disciplines ought to remain secret even if that causes us some discomfort. Perhaps that is exactly what we need.

Whatever we choose to do, it is important not to restrict ourselves to the typical Lenten disciplines of "*self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word.*" (BCP, 1979, page 265)

Think outside that little liturgical box. Think of reconciliation of broken relationships, think of volunteering, ultimately think about how to love our neighbor.

Another personal observation, if we do something during Lent, if that thing is truly a right and good and joyful thing to do; if it is true neighbor love, then why not continue doing it permanently. Just a thought.

Finally, I will answer the question that arises every single year: what about the ashes? Do I leave them on? Do I wipe them off?

Well, I think you know my answer but let me mention something to you.

I imagine most everyone here thinks the imposition of ashes on Ash Wednesday is an ancient and honorable Anglican tradition. It is not. The commemoration of the day is a tradition but the placing of ashes on the forehead is liturgically a very recent act.

(In 1532, when Thomas Cranmer became Archbishop of Canterbury the first thing he did, even prior to signing off on King Henry VIII's divorce papers, was to **forbid the imposition of ashes on Ash Wednesday.**)

The imposition of ashes, as an **official** part of the Episcopal Church liturgy, began only with the *Book of Common Prayer, 1979*.

So why do we feel like we've been doing this forever?

Then there is the other problem with Ash Wednesday and the ashes, and it is embodied in the gospel reading . . .

If we need ashes on our foreheads to prove we are Christians, then we have other issues. In ancient Roman times the last pagan Emperor bewailed the fact that Christians

were more moral and upstanding than his pagan priests. Emperor Julian (known as the "Apostate") said, "*These impious Galileans not only feed their own poor, but ours also; welcoming them into their feast.*" and "*See how they love one another.*"

Ash Wednesday doesn't need to turn into an outward display of religiosity. Ashes on our foreheads doesn't make us holy or indicate that we are saved. God isn't interested in our ashes. God is concerned only with our faith. When have faith in Jesus, God takes us just as we are in our sins, in our imperfections, in our weird strivings, with all our strange thoughts and loves us like God's own true child.

As Christians we should not say, "What would Jesus do?" Rather, we must ask, "What did Jesus **say to do?**"