

ASH WEDNESDAY 10 FEB 2016

2 Cor c5 vv20b – c6 v10

Matt c6 vv1-6 & 16 – 21

Let us start with prayer by using the Collect for Ash Wednesday:-

“Almighty & everlasting God,
You hate nothing that you have made
And forgive the sins of all that are penitent:
Create and make in us new and contrite hearts
That we, worthily lamenting our sins
And acknowledging our wretchedness,
May receive from You, the God of all mercy,
Perfect remission and forgiveness;
Through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord,
Who is alive and reigns with You,
In the unity of the Holy Spirit,
One God, now and forever. Amen.

The Book of Common Prayer, and its various modern alternatives, all provide that that Collect should be said at all services throughout Lent. The obvious reason, as with the similar rule during Advent for the Collect for Advent, is that both were considered specially important as setting the tone for the season. There is a similar history to the Gospel set for today – that has been set since 1549. The Epistle for today has a slightly shorter history. It has been set since 1662 (though admittedly there was an alternative reading from the prophet Joel who told the Israelites not only to fast but to rend their hearts as well as their clothes). In short, Joel required repentance.

So, does anything strike you, reading the Gospel & Epistle passages together with the Collect, as to what the Church thinks Lent is all about and how, if at all, does that compare with the view of the average person in the street (assuming that that person has heard of Lent and knows anything about it)? Is Lent, like the New Year, thought to be a time for making resolutions and especially a resolution to give up something of our own choosing?

Well, I think the answer is “No”. We need no new resolution unless it is to repent again and again; and that is what Shrove Tuesday (and the 2 days preceding it) was all about. Christians traditionally confessed their sins on Shrove Tuesday and were shriven (ie received forgiveness) and fasted (traditionally gave up rich food (like meat) in Lent – though we know from Mark’s Gospel (c2 vv18 - 22) that one of the things that surprised the average Jew in the street about Jesus’ disciples was that they, unlike the Pharisees and John the Baptist’s disciples, did not fast. Jesus however seems to have assumed that there would come a time (when He was no longer around) when the disciples would fast. The Collect says nothing about fasting but begs that “we, worthily lamenting our sins may have new and contrite hearts” and “receive... perfect remission and forgiveness” of our sins. We can think of “worthily lamenting” as crying out loud with shame and resolving (with God’s help) to try harder to be better. “Remission” in this case not having the modern meaning of a temporary absence of illness but total cancellation of our wrongdoing so that our sins are not just forgiven but, so far as God is concerned, totally blotted out (just as though they had never been committed).

So let's move onto to Paul's 2nd letter to the Corinthians. Corinth was as notorious for its vice as Soho was, or is, to us. We know from Acts [c18 v11] that Paul on his first visit to Corinth lived there for a year and a half and dearly loved the small church which he had established there but he later returned for a visit which in this Epistle he described as "painful" [c2 v1]. Paul in this part of his letter begs the Corinthian Christians to accept God's forgiveness ("be reconciled to God") because God, in order to make the Corinthians (and thus all Christians) righteous, had made Christ (who was totally without sin) to be treated, through His death on the cross, as though He were "sin". It is because of this extraordinary act of love by God that Paul goes on (in c6) to exhort the Christians in Corinth (and, by inference, us) to strive for the highest standards of Christian living.

In v2 he quotes from Isaiah (c49 v8) and goes on to write "now is the time of God's favour [and our] .. salvation". He adds (truthfully) that he has done nothing to make Christian life difficult. [We only need to think of the argument which he won, in Jerusalem, as to whether Christians must adopt Jewish obligations]. Starting with the 2nd part of v4 Paul writes so excitedly that it is not clear whether the "we" about whom he is writing is he Paul alone, or he and Timothy (the co-author of the letter; see c1v1) or all Christians but it seems likely that what he goes on to describe like battle honours on a military flag, are the physical and psychological experiences that he himself has had:-

"...in great endurance; in trouble, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots [think Ephesus]; in hard work [he always earned his keep and did not encourage idleness], sleepless nights [especially in prison] and hunger; in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; through glory and dishonour; bad report and good report; genuine yet regarded as impostors [in effect he was looked upon by non-Christians, and Jews in particular, as a charlatan or fraudster]; known yet regarded as unknown; dying yet we live on; beaten yet not killed; sorrowful yet always rejoicing; poor yet making many rich; having nothing and yet possessing everything".

If this is a summary by Paul of his life as a missionary (following his conversion) it corresponds reasonably well with Luke's later written description of Paul's missionary journeys in the latter part of Acts. [Compare the translation of "The New Testament" (and the commentary upon it) by Nicholas King (2004 p398)]. Paul's life as a missionary was no mere period of eating simply for 6 weeks a year but total life-long dedication to God the Father through belief in Jesus his Son.

So now let's turn to chapter 6 of Matthew where Jesus continues to teach his disciples godly living. Our passage contains at v6 (relating to prayer) words which were "lived out" (we might describe it as "died out") with total application almost 250 years ago just south of Islington Green. The overriding principle is set out in v1; whatever we do by way of putting our beliefs into practice must be done with a pure (and without any extraneous) motive.

Thus, if all or part of our motive is worldly (for instance because we want to be admired) we will have had our reward in this life. If, on the other hand, our motive is pure (or other worldly) then God will reward us in heaven. Jesus deals with 4 areas of godly living for the first 3 of which he also provides examples of the opposite:-

1. Giving to charity (particularly for the relief of poverty; vv2 to 4);
2. Praying (vv5 & 6);
3. Fasting (vv 16 to 18); &
4. Avoiding greed in its widest sense.

As to charitable giving Jesus would have made his disciples smile when he talked about giving to charity. He told them not to let “your left hand know what your right hand is doing”. Try writing a letter or driving a car whilst at the same time getting your purse or wallet out of your back pocket!!! But what Jesus is, I think, saying is “Don’t have 2nd thoughts – because the first impulse to give is probably the soundest and most generous”. Don’t immediately after you’ve made up your mind to give ask yourself “Can I afford that much?” And don’t forget the context of what Jesus was saying - charitable giving for Jews was quite public in Jesus’ day – think of the story about Jesus and the widow’s mite told in both Mark (c12 vv41- 43) and Luke (c20 vv45 -47 & c21 vv1 – 4) after Jesus had complained about the conspicuous wearing of religious clothes.

As to praying Jesus told his disciples to go into a private room and shut the door when they prayed. I’ll come back to this but in the meantime think about the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem.

As to fasting Jesus said don’t let others know (or even guess) what you are doing. So if you’ve decided to give up something for Lent don’t tell anyone but look happy and well fed (if you can).

And in vv19 to 21 Jesus summed up all this part of his teaching when He told his disciples how to avoid greed. He told them to lay up treasure in heaven because where our treasure (that is whatever is important to us) is to be found, there our heart will also be. And in this context just think about the part of Paul’s letter which we have just been considering – can there be any doubt where Paul thought his treasure was?

In closing I return to the Islington resident of 250 years ago who took vv 5 & 6 (those relating to prayer) so seriously. That resident was Alexander Cruden after whom I feel sure Cruden Street (which runs between St Peter’s and Packington Streets) was named. [Think also the religious names of Rector & Prebend Streets nearby]. Cruden could probably be thought of as the patron saint of English speaking preachers and theologians and though he was a Scotsman he lived the latter part of his life and died at 45 Camden Passage – almost diametrically opposite the Camden Head pub (and on the same side as Lizzie Evans “SMUG”). You can see a bust of Cruden and a plaque outside 45 (the ground floor is now a restaurant). When Cruden lived there he had, leading off his bedroom, a much smaller room the door of which he always kept shut. Cruden was born in Aberdeen in 1701 (just before Scotland lost its independence) and would by modern standards have been thought of as unconventional and eccentric; but he was precise. The work for which he is now remembered is his “Biblical Concordance” which he began to write in 1736 and completed in 1737 and dedicated to Queen Caroline 17 days before she died. Though there had been Concordances for the Bible in Latin (“the Vulgate”) published in Europe the only previous English concordance was written by the composer Marbecke during the reign of Henry VIII and for his pains (that is because Marbecke wrote in English, not Latin; and having nothing to do with content) he was condemned to be burnt at the stake; though he was subsequently reprieved. One of Cruden’s eccentric acts was to take into his house in Camden Passage a homeless and dissolute girl to be his maid. One of her daily tasks was to make his bed and clean his room but she was ordered on no account to open the door into the little room off his bedroom and certainly never to go into it. One day Cruden didn’t come down to breakfast and so the girl assumed Cruden had got up early and gone out so she went upstairs made his bed and left the room (having cleaned it). The next day Cruden once more failed to appear so the girl went upstairs and found the bed made. She immediately feared for his health. Scared and filled with fear the girl opened the door and found Cruden kneeling but dead. The day was 1 November 1770. That date is All Saints Day. I think Alexander Cruden would have appreciated that. We can assume Cruden died knowing where he had put his “treasure”. Cruden’s challenge to us today, in

2016, is for each of us to ask ourselves “Where is our heart?” It looks to me as though Cruden certainly knew where he had “put his treasure”. Cruden wanted people to be able not only to use the bible easily but then to live it out. He died doing just that. How will we be found?

Praise ye the Lord!

The Lord’s name be praised!

Amen