Ash Wednesday, 22nd February 2023

Reading Matthew 6.1-6, 16-21
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Ash Wednesday. One of those annual milestones, a moment to add up the score. How have things changed since the last time we did this?
Out there, quite a lot. Last Ash Wednesday, Mr Putin’s evil invasion of Ukraine was less than a fortnight old and expected to succeed within the month. In this country we were beginning to celebrate the Queen’s Platinum Jubilee, with Mr Johnson firmly in No.10.
In here, things are different too. On Ash Wednesday 2022 you were worshipping under a scaffolding marvel nicknamed the birdcage.
But what about our insides? How much has happened in here in twelve months? Have I grown in grace? Have I been getting more exercise? Have I become more prayerful? Or cut down on biscuits? Oh dear. Something Must Be Done.
These are the thoughts that might make you throw yourself into Lent and its traditional disciplines of praying, fasting, giving, with the same determination with makes so many people join the gym every January. And I don’t want to talk you out of any of that, but what is this discipline for? More importantly, who is it for?
In today’s gospel, Matthew describes Jesus warning his followers about the way we can kid ourselves in these matters. Those hypocrites who announce their generosity and their piety to the world, he asks, who is their giving and their praying for? It’s for them, isn’t it? They aren’t actually giving anything, they are investing money and time in their own image, their public virtue. And they have their reward already, in the way that others see them. Don’t be like them, says Jesus; instead, do (say) your giving in secret and God will reward you.
I must confess, for a long while I was dissatisfied with this teaching of Jesus: it just seemed to replace in-your-face self-centredness with a more discreet version. To explain: when we get to the collection, the way not to do it is to flourish a roll of fifties and drop them theatrically into the bag. People might wonder, just now, where you had got them – cashing shares in Centrica, perhaps? – and you would be like the hypocrites: ‘Hey, people, how generous am I!’ But let’s say you slip a GiftAid envelope (large cheque enclosed) into the plate – are you any better? Aren’t you still playing to an audience, but a smaller and more exclusive one – that is, God and yourself?
Recently, embarrassingly recently, the penny dropped. I realised what Jesus means when he then says, ‘When you give, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.’ I think he means: keep your generosity a secret from the crowd (yes, we’ve discussed that) and keep it a secret even from yourself; and then, when you forget about yourself, your Father will reward you.
That sounds just like some of the other sayings in the Jesus tradition: ‘Those who lose their lives will save them’, things like that. It also sounds impossible. How can you deliberately do something and not know you are doing it? It’s self-defeating, like when you try to be natural, or try to fall asleep; or if I say to you: ‘Do not think about the Eiffel Tower.’
We are self-conscious creatures, that’s the trouble. Mind you, this trick of self-consciousness, being present to ourselves, has enabled us – so far – to make a great living in the world: the ability I have to listen to myself saying these words, the ability you have to ‘watch’ yourself listening to them, this is what enables us to learn from the past and plan the future, far more than any other creatures with whom we share this planet.
But it’s also what can turn what we do to dust and ashes. Why am I being nice to you? Not just for your sake, but because I like to see myself – and I want others to see me – as a nice person. In a Noel Coward play I once saw, the main character was a smooth, selfish man. At
one moment he seemed to see this and regret it. ‘When I come into a room,’ he said, ‘I’m looking in the mirror to watch myself go by.’ But there is hope. We are self-conscious creatures, but sometimes we can be self-forgetting ones too. In the reports of the earthquake in Turkey and Syria, there are stories of people so filled-up with fear for a neighbour, or with hope at the sound of a voice under the rubble, that they forget themselves, take great risks, work incessantly. In a year’s time, they might struggle to believe that it was they who did those prodigious things. And, less dramatically, we can know such moments too. Think of when a news item cuts through the self-reflexive chatter in your mind; or that most self-forgetting moment when someone makes you really laugh. At moments like these, we do forget ourselves. And do we also catch a glimpse (just a glimpse) of what the unselfconscious contemplation of God might be like? And what Jesus might mean when he talks about gaining your life by losing it? So, if you are not already sorted for a Lent project, here is a thought. Try to put yourself in the way of self-forgetting moments. Without them, there’s a danger that our attempts at keeping a holy Lent will also be just dust and ashes: your attempts to eat less may be just a bit of narcissism, or a response to body shame. Attempts to pray may be more about a thing called ‘your spirituality’ than about God. And my attempts to give may just be investment in my self-image, or a bribe to make my guilt go away for a bit, rather than the action of an open, selfless heart. How might you find such moments? If music’s your thing, TS Eliot has a line about forgetting yourself in the stuff, when he talks about:

    music that is heard so deeply that it is not heard,
    But you are the music while the music lasts.

Or it may be poems, or a book, or cinema, or TV. Whatever it is, one discipline of Lent may be to choose what you watch, or hear or read in a certain way: to go for what is less familiar, what will stretch or disturb or provoke rather than what will simply entertain. Experiment with the difference between consuming something and running the risk of being consumed by it. At 9pm tomorrow, for instance, it might mean watching Journey’s End rather than The Apprentice.

None of this, of course, can take the place of giving time to pray, to read the Bible or to worship – that would be just another way of kidding ourselves. But it may help us do those things better. Self-forgetting moments can be moments when we are moulded by what is other than us, when we let our selves be un-selfed. And a life that is open to that is a life that is a little less unready to meet God.