

Readings: Isaiah 58: 1-12.

Matt 6: 1-6, 16-21.

Thirty years ago today I was standing at my kitchen sink washing up the breakfast things when I sensed the love of God enveloping me. It was an amazing experience and had been a result of my prayer the previous day to be filled with the Holy Spirit. The intensity of the experience lasted for a full week, and during that time I ceased asking questions and just wallowed in the love I felt. I also had a heightened awareness of God's love for other people, and stories in the newspaper sparked more of an emotional reaction than normal.

I was at a party a week later and had a stab of conscience when I shared in a rather bad joke about a recent event. My euphoria then began to dwindle as I realized my capacity for sinful behaviour. Since then, over a length of time, I was taken on a journey to repent of quite a lot of stuff in my life, including some wrong ideas I had held about the Christian faith. I was led back into a better grounding of traditional biblical faith; and the journey NEVER ceases.

All of us here will I'm sure be very aware of the prodding of God into our consciences whenever we think, do or say something that God would disapprove of. It is the reason why each week we say prayers of confession in our services. In this world we are never going to be free of the capacity for sin.

So, firstly, as I discovered, as Christians we become aware of the eternal kingdom of God that permeates this world, a realm where God reigns supreme; and secondly, it is a kingdom where God longs to make us aware of our need to repent, so he can pour out his forgiveness and mercy on us and enable us to seek those qualities that will constitute the eternal treasure we need to store up within the realm of his kingdom.

The main theme that underlies today's scriptural readings is the sin of wrong motives that lie behind our actions. Looking at our motives is a very useful exercise and can help us to do God's work for the right reasons, and also it brings us back down to earth when we realise how our actions can be tainted with such things as pride or the desire for human approval. We are constantly

pulled into the need for repentance, but that opens us up to the mercy that God is always ready to give.

In our Old Testament reading what was missing was the Israelites' awareness of where their sins lay. It had to be pointed out to them. What good was it to call out to God and to fast with sackcloth and ashes if their motives were devoid of any intention to repent? It meant nothing if they continued to quarrel and lack the compassion to help those in need.

In Jesus' day the rabbis knew of the dangers of an outward display of righteousness just to be admired. As a result steps were taken so that money could be given without the giver knowing who the recipients were, or the receivers knowing who had given. Nevertheless Jesus was very aware of the real motives that were in the hearts of some of the Jews. If it was only for prestige in this world then they would receive that admiration they craved; but they would receive no reward from God if they only sought the world's approval. The same could be said in today's world if people seek the admiration of others first and foremost, and flaunt their good actions to gain that admiration. Almsgiving, prayer and fasting were important to the Jews, and Jesus didn't dispute this. But he was concerned if things were done for wrong reasons.

I'm basically quite lazy and I question my own motives if I'm doing something because I feel I ought to out of a sense of duty, rather than because I really want to. There are pitfalls in many ways when we study the motives behind our actions.

Apart from Almsgiving, Jesus had much to say about prayer and fasting. Jews were expected to pray certain prayers at certain times of the day, a bit like Muslims. It is something that perhaps we could do more of, but there is the danger of rigid formalism – people caring more about how they are praying rather than what they are saying.

Some people put on a public display of repetitive prayer in order to look good. Well, I don't think many of us in this church are in danger of being public about our praying, apart from during our main services. I imagine we are more inclined to pray behind our own closed doors, but when we say the Lord's Prayer perhaps we should ask ourselves if we are mindful of the words we say, or do we just say it whilst letting our minds wander onto other things? And are

we honest in the words we use when we pray? These are perhaps questions we should ask ourselves.

Then there is the subject of fasting. Again we probably aren't in danger of flaunting it as some of the Jews did. If we choose to fast then what is our motive? Is it to look good? Is it just to cut down on our chocolate intake in the hopes of losing a few pounds, or is it really an attempt to disconnect with this world in order to focus on the needs of God's kingdom?

Ultimately, Jesus desires for us to store up treasure in God's kingdom rather than in this one. We can't take anything into his kingdom apart from ourselves. The world's treasures are only temporary. This world IS important but more in terms of what we learn from it about God's priorities, rather than our own.

This Ash Wednesday Service is important in terms of giving us the opportunity to recognise our sin and to repent, including for wrong motives behind our actions. But it isn't about making us feel bad, so much as providing the opportunity for God's forgiveness and mercy to be poured out upon us, and to refocus our hearts on the treasures of God's kingdom.