

St. Thomas's Episcopal Church
Ash Wednesday, 2025

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."

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

When I was young I attended an Episcopal school for four years named St. Thomas's- not our St. Thomas's, but another in New York City. I was there for four years, and one of my strongest and fondest memories is our first-night ritual. After meeting new students and greeting old friends, we would gather in the living room by the fireplace, sitting on chairs, couches or on a big rug. The head of school would welcome us, introduce new students, and then say a few words to us. They were always the same. He would say: "I hope your time at St. Thomas's will be a time when you can get to know yourselves a bit better and when you can get to know God a bit better." I remember being struck even then by those words and by that thought. He said it so gently and naturally that it felt as if that really was why we were there.

I came to appreciate over time two wonderful things about those opening words. First was the implication that of all the reasons we were there at school, these were the most important. We of course had all the aspirations one would expect of students our age: learning, academics, sports, friendships, music, art and more. But all of that faded next to getting to know ourselves and God just a bit better. And then second and maybe most wonderfully the implication that there would be more chances down the road, that we were there to know God and ourselves *just a bit better*, that no one expected us to get all the way there. There was always next semester and next year and the year after.

If I could have one wish for us this day, Ash Wednesday, and for this holy season of Lent here at *our* St. Thomas's, it would be simply this: that this might be a time when we get to know ourselves a bit better and when we can get to know God a bit better. A time when we might be invited into a new closeness with God and into new understanding of ourselves, and of who we are as God's own. That we might enter this brief period of prayer, self-examination and retreat knowing that it isn't the only one we'll ever get and that we aren't expected to get all the way there, but that we are invited to take a step, to come a bit closer, to engage this pilgrim walk, to clear our tables of busy-ness as we are able and to take a bit of time for reflection, for prayer, a bit more time with God.

And so of course the question is: *How do we do that?* How do we come to know ourselves a bit better and how do we come to know God a bit better? This great day suggests at least two ways. First, and most simply, in a faith centered in the divine one who came to be with us and to be known by us, we simply behold him. We behold the one who shows us who *we are* at our most essential and who shows us *who God is*. In the old classic formulation, Jesus came as a mirror to humanity and a window to God. Through him we see who we might indeed be at our core, as created and loved into being by God, and through him we are equipped uniquely and powerfully to see who God is.

But second and I think most vividly on this holy day, we do it by being honest. We are called on Ash Wednesday most simply to honesty with ourselves and honesty with God. That isn't always easy for us. Our head of school at St. Thomas's in New York guided and led us in an interesting way: never with a raised voice or with demerits or things of that nature but with honesty and in a consistent call to honesty. But it wasn't always easy. My brother attended the school as well and he and I would remember meetings with the head, most of which were routine or check-ins. But occasionally they were what my brother called "red pens." These were conversations when the head wanted to go a bit deeper and he'd bring a pad and, yes, a red pen, and ask questions that got you thinking and pushed you to be more honest with yourself. His questions were essentially little wakeup calls, little calls to honesty.

I remember one "red pen" conversation I had with him when I was in 7th grade. The school ends in 8th grade; it was toward the end of the year and I was hoping for a leadership position in my final year. And so he invited me to talk about it. When I got to his office I was surprised to see, of all things, the pad and red pen. I thought I was a shoo-in for this! I didn't need the red pen! He knew I felt that way of course and his questions all pushed me to be honest with myself about it. He pushed me on motivation and on maybe how this connected to *getting into a good high school* but the toughest question surprised me. "How will you feel," he asked, "if someone else is chosen?" Someone else?? And that's when I saw it. I was focused on status and achievement. But the role wasn't about that. It was about caring for others.

And so yes, finally, yes: today's gospel is something of a *red pen* conversation or a wakeup call, and so is this holy day and so is in fact this holy season. In the best sense. Lent is a call to honesty and a call to take a close look at *anything* that might be in the way right now of our drawing closer to God. It's a day for coming to God unadorned, honest, utterly real, knowing that there's no point in hiding, ready to say "Here I am, Lord; guide me, shape me, form me." Ashes could not be any more real. Nothing could invite us any more directly or bluntly into being honest. They remind

us each year in the simplest way that there's no point in hiding from ourselves or from God. And that there is no more holy or wondrous invitation than this one: Come closer. Come just a bit closer and know just a bit more of that wholeness and that fulness of life that awaits you. That's the challenge and the great beauty of this holy day and of this holy season.

The hymn our head of school loved most was a simple one. I'll bet many of us know it: "Day by day, dear Lord, three things I pray: to see you more clearly, love you more dearly, follow you more nearly day by day." Today we begin a walk that lasts forty days but never asks for more than a day or a step at a time. It's a walk with Jesus and it's a beautiful, life-giving walk with him toward wholeness and toward fullness of life. It's a walk that brings us ever closer to God, just as we are. *And it begins right now.* Thanks be to God. Amen.