

Sermon: 2019/03/06 ("Ash Wednesday") - Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 103:8-14; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; & Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21_BTR

""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.""

- This quotation is lifted straight from Jesus' famous "Sermon on the Mount."
It is a warning.

About what exactly?

We're going to "unpack" it together in just a moment.

But notice first of all that it presumes something

- it *presumes* that you are (*already*) 'practicing' something called, 'piety'.

And what is *that*, exactly?

"Piety."

If we're supposed to be doing it, we need to know what it is, right?

Yet, in my ears, it sounds so... old fashioned.

So, unfamiliar.

Like a dusty antique that you find sitting in your great-grandmother's drawing room, under a sheet of plastic or cloth - to protect it from marauding moths or misbehaving children.

It sounds like it belongs to an era when Queen Victoria sat on the throne, and Americans got around on paddle-steamers, and ladies wore dainty lace gloves and fanned themselves.

Do we now - in the 21st century - even understand "piety," let alone exhibit it in our persons?

It is hard to say.

"Give me that old time religion" goes the song.

But do we really mean it?

Or has "piety" been thrown out with the baby and the bath-water?

It certainly doesn't sound "cool" or contemporary does it?

We care more about being inclusive or relevant than...pious.

It's almost a dirty word.

Something to avoid.

You certainly don't hear it being used as a compliment - being used aspirationally.

But - to reiterate - the clear, *unmistakable* implication of Jesus' words (to us just now) is that 'piety' is meant to be an important quality in His followers.

So, what is that "quality"?

According to online dictionaries it is "to be dutiful in religious observance."

"Dutiful in religious observance."

Is that you?

Is that what neighbors would say about you?

"Oh yeah, X is so *dutiful* about attending worship services.

So, *dutiful* about 'saying grace' at mealtimes.

So, *dutiful* about going to 'Sunday School.'"

And so on.

Or are you known as someone who happily - *casually* - *regularly* - casts these things aside for any better 'offer'?

For golf.

Because it's raining.

Because the Football is on the "telly."

You know, most of us are too embarrassed to pray in McDonald's or Arby's before tucking into a burger, let alone to walk around all day with an ashen cross on our foreheads.

We're so concerned about the opinion of others - *even of strangers(!)* - that we usually do so little to betray our Christian allegiance.

But here - tonight - we're warned about the very opposite:

about performing "religious" observances *for the sake of being seen*.

This seems like a problem for another age and another place.

However, *within* the Church it does remain a "trap."

To "go through the motions" without really believing sincerely in what it is that you're doing;

to not really care for theology and ideas and doctrine behind the liturgy being spoken.

When we confess, for instance.

Do you really mean "*forgive me* for my trespasses"?

If you don't, if it is just hot air escaping from your mouth, then the gospel reading this evening counsels you to stop and think again.

For, it has to come from your heart.

Prayers and candles and genuflecting and crossing yourself - these don't have some sort of intrinsic magic of their own.

The 'General Confession' isn't an incantation that forces God to extend you His forgiveness just because you said a special formula.

You have to *want* it.

This is the point that *Isaiah* was making to his contemporaries:

"Don't complain that things have gone wrong in your life just because you went to Temple," the prophet explains.

You should go to Temple (whatever the weather and whatever your life circumstances) because you love the Lord and that's His house.

Because you genuinely want to please Him and to know Him.

He's no fool.

And if you are looking to genuinely please Him and to know Him, then being "pious" - being *dutiful in religious observance* - is the most perfect way.

Let's take a moment to reflect.