

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

To the Jew there were three great pillars on which the good life was based.

Alms giving

Prayer

Fasting

Jesus would not have disputed this. What bothered him was that as is so often the case, the best things were done for the wrong reason.

Isaiah had the same complaint about the Israelites attitude. He accused them of approaching God as if they were a righteous nation while all the time they oppressed their neighbours. Isaiah calls them in their seeking

after God to put aside their self-serving interests and to “pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted” and explains that true religion strives for justice for the poor and the oppressed.

The fasting, prayers and alms giving, which are good in themselves are some of the things which most readily lend themselves to being spoilt by wrong motives. For example: The person who gives alms not to help but to demonstrate his own generosity or more subtly to bask in the warmth of someone's gratitude.

OR The man or woman who prays in such a way that his or her pray is not addressed to God but is to impress fellow worshipers with its piety and show of spirituality.

Even the act of fasting does not escape, it can become not an act for the good of the soul in humility before God, but a display of self discipline. Each of these can develop into a practice of good works in order to gain praise from peers, to increase prestige and show off just how good a person is.

True religion is not about outward appearance but comes from the heart. Its not about outward appearances but inner motivation inspired by love.

So Jesus, also, while not discounting the intrinsic value of each of these actions, addresses the impetus behind them.

He begins with alms giving. There are numerous reasons which may prompt alms giving.

It may be from a sense of duty, or perhaps a desire to develop a particular standing in the community, in which case the person is looking for recognition and thanks for the generosity they have shown and so is feeding their own vanity and sense of power. However, it may be from an instinctive overflowing of kindness and love.

Next, Jesus moves on to the subject of prayer. The faults which creep into the habit of prayer are something we are all faced with at some time in our lives. The more seriously we take prayer the greater the danger. It is not the failing of neglect, but of misguided piety. What we applaud as regular

prayer can become simply a garbled repetition, recited with out meaning or conviction. For some, specific set times of prayer, a good thing in itself, becomes a ritual performed with out a thought of God in between. Another danger can be to associate prayer with a particular place, such as church, in such a rigid way that there is not flexibility to encounter God in other ways and places, in the everyday and the ordinary things of life; in nature, in the kindly act of another, in music and poetry.

Then there comes the question of fasting. Fasting was and for some still is an essential part of religious life, particularly in the Jewish and Islamic

religions. Many who fast believe that it makes prayer more immediate and adds intensity to it. There is a tendency not to be into fasting now-a-days. The danger is that those who practice it may begin to look on it as a sign of superior piety. There is only value in abstinence be it of food or something else, is if it brings us closer to God.

Jesus criticised those who were hypocritical.

A hypocrite is someone who puts on a false appearance, like a person who pretends to have virtues, moral or religious beliefs, or principles, that he or she does not actually possess. It's a mask they wear before the world.

The charge of hypocrisy is levelled at those who are really only interested in their own glory and receiving the adulation of others. Those who are more

concerned with being seen to be “doing it right” than with deep devoted prayer, sincere worship and humble service.

For the Jew, alms giving and fasting were bound together with prayer one fed and nurtured the other.

In the middle of this evenings Gospel passage, (the bit we did not read), is the Lord’s Prayer. If we pray a right, then the rest will fall into place. We don’t have to impress any one with our prayers not even God. All he asks of us is to sincerely open our hearts to him and listen for his voice speaking to us.

I would like to end with the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples. I am going to use the version we used at Night Prayer at the end of our evening

lectures when I was training for ordination . I hope that the unfamiliarity of the words, as we reflect on each phrase, may help us to open to God in a fresh and more meaningful way.

Eternal Spirit, Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver,

Source of all that is and that shall be,

Father and Mother of us all,

Loving God, in whom is heaven:

The hallowing of your name echo through the universe!

The way of your justice be followed by the peoples of the world!

Your heavenly will be done by all created beings!

Your commonwealth of peace and freedom sustain our hope and come on earth.

With the bread we need for today, feed us.

In the hurts we do to one another, forgive us.

With the grace to forgive each other, supply us

In times of temptation and test, strengthen us.

From trials too great to endure, spare us.

From the grip of all that is evil, free us.

For you reign in the glory of the power that is love, now and forever. Amen.