

True Religion by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Ash Wednesday, 5th March 2025
at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Isaiah 58:1-12, Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

Introduction: What is religion?

The Cambridge online dictionary defines religion as “the belief in and worship of a god or gods, or any such system of belief and worship”.¹

For many people, the word *religion* has negative connotations: some argue that religion is the cause of many wars and injustices – as if human beings wouldn't fight and oppress one another in any case, with or without religion as an excuse.

For others, religion means “organised religion” – church hierarchies, liturgies, buildings, and a set of rules about how to live your life and what rituals to follow, and this puts off people who are more interested individual spirituality, which you can customise to suit yourself.

And for some in the more evangelical churches, the word *religion* has connotations of trying to get to earn your way into heaven through rituals and good deeds, instead of through the undeserved grace that God offers to sinners.

False religion

All of these positions have a point. Religion certainly can be used by power-hungry rulers or fanatical groups to impose

¹ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/religion> (accessed 4th March 2025)

their control over others. And religious extremists can do appalling things in the name of what they think is true and right, refusing to acknowledge that other people may sincerely hold a more moderate view.

And it's certainly true that people can use formal religious observance to make themselves feel "holier than thou", while ignoring the most important aspects of religion, which are to love God and your neighbour.

True religion

Both of our readings today put the record straight. In Matthew chapter 6 Jesus condemns people who use their religious practice to impress other people, whether it's by ostentatiously giving to the poor, or by praying in public, or by making it obvious that they are fasting. They have already received their reward, says Jesus, and their reward is to gain the admiration of other people. God, however, rewards those whose piety is between them and God, the people who pray in private because they actually want a relationship with God.

For Jesus, that relationship with God is the heart of true religion. And for true believers, treasure in heaven is where their heart is, not material riches or benefits. In our material world, and in our comfortable lives, where does *our* heart lie? What is the most important thing in our lives – health, wealth and security, or our relationship with our heavenly Father?

Loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength is the first commandment. But the second, to love your neighbour is just as important. As the Apostle John puts it, how can you

say you love God while you are neglecting to show love to your brother or sister who is in need?²

Loving your neighbour is the issue in Isaiah chapter 58. Here God is rebuking Israel for carrying out all the religious rituals, such as fasting, while practising injustice in business and ignoring the needs of the poor and needy. Here are a few snippets of Isaiah's message:

Yet day after day they seek me
and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that practised righteousness
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God...

... Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day,
and oppress all your workers...

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?³

To sum up, the people are being criticised for paying lip-service to religion, while indulging in unjust business practices that oppress their workers and ignoring the needy and vulnerable in their community. Their fasting is not going to earn God's favour, since the people who are fasting have no intention whatsoever of obeying God's commands to "do

² 1 John 4:20

³ Isaiah 58:2,3,6-7 NRSV

justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God”, as the prophet Micah put it⁴.

The Apostle James, the brother of Jesus, describes true religion very clearly in his letter:

If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.⁵

Lent take-away

So what does all this mean for us as we enter the Lenten season today? I don't know what kind of fasting you might be planning to do – perhaps abstaining from alcohol or chocolate or some other form of self-discipline. Do Isaiah's words mean fasting is a waste of time?

If we listen to Jesus, clearly not. He says “Whenever you fast...”⁶ So fasting, in whatever form, is definitely a valid practice. But the message of our two readings today is that what God is interested in is our heart. Fasting is a way of showing both God and ourselves that we are serious about our faith. We are depriving ourselves of food, or of some comfort or luxury, so as to enhance our prayer, or to gain self-discipline, so that we can be better servants of God. The fasting of people in Isaiah's day was unacceptable to God because the selfish way they were living proved that they weren't really interested in God's priorities at all. It was an

⁴ Micah 6:8 NRSV

⁵ James 1:26-27 NRSV

⁶ Matthew 6:16

outward ritual that did not reflect a sincere desire to obey God. These people were using religion for their own purposes, just as the people Jesus criticised were trying to impress others with their show of piety.

Lent is designed to be a period in which we examine ourselves, asking God's Spirit to show us any areas of our lives in which we are not being whole-hearted in obeying his commandments, which are to love God with all our hearts and our neighbours as ourselves. If fasting, or abstaining from something, helps you do this, please fast.

The message from the prophecy of Isaiah and other parts of the Bible is that no religious observance means anything to God if we are not following the principle in the prophecy of Micah: "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God." With so much need and injustice in the world, we wealthy Christians need to examine whether we are putting our faith into practice through ethical shopping and regular, generous and sacrificial giving to those in need. And this, of course, on top of day-to-day acts of kindness to those around us, which should be taken as read.

So let's start by taking a moment of silence now, to ask ourselves if there is an area of our lives where we are not being fully obedient to God.

[Silence]

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.⁷ Amen.

⁷ Psalm 51:11