

Good Piety

22 February 2023

Isaiah 58.1-12

Ash Wednesday

Matthew 6.1-6,16-21

Revd. Alan Keeler

Holier than thou

Let me ask you:

Do you assault people to get what you want?

Are you a liar?

Do you steal things?

Do you look down on other people and despise them to feel good?

I imagine you feel insulted that I've even asked you such things. You are Christians. you know what God asks us. and the sorts of behaviours I mentioned earlier are clearly off limits.

You are Christians so let me ask you:

Are you holy?

Are you pious?

Are you religious?

I wouldn't be surprised if you feel uncomfortable with those questions because they might not sit right. you probably don't feel insulted as with the first set of questions. but there can be things about how we practise our faith that can be done badly. perhaps the phrase 'holier than thou' sums it up. of course holiness is important and God calls us to that. but there can be many expressions of holiness that seem proud, arrogant and aloof.

if this is what you feel you're in the company of Isaiah and Jesus in the readings that we have just heard.

Good holiness

Isaiah and Jesus see the ways that people use matters of faith in the wrong way. but they are nevertheless passionate to see people getting their faith right.

So Isaiah is looking for justice, provision for the hungry, for the homeless to be housed. But this is not just social action it is about drawing close to God. He says you shall call and the Lord will answer. He says the Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your needs. Isaiah knows the being people of devotion and people of action go together.

so Jesus is assuming that people will give arms, they will pray, they will fast. But in each of these

he wants a correct attitude. There were people of his day who were using their piety as a badge of honour. But why would that be wrong?

True faith

There is of course the obvious unpleasantness of people jockeying for position and putting other people down. There is an old adage 'you don't make yourself taller by cutting other people's heads off'.

But there is a deeper failing in that we think we have achieved something and so it is all about us. it is the way of the world to want to have results, to be admired and to remove our anxiety's by showing our strength.

Jesus makes the clear distinction between treasures on earth which will decay and treasures in heaven which last for eternity.

For Jesus the true treasures I'm not the results of what we do become as gifts from God. the true treasures of this life and the next or about relationships that endure, prepared to put others first and demonstrate that with actions that might have to be courageous or sacrificial.

It is these things but mark out Jesus view of holiness. It is not a series of actions that religious people are supposed to do. holiness is marked out as being different from the obvious, what everybody else does or done for an immediate reward. God is holy. that is not to say he is just beyond us. it is to say he is with us but in a way the calls us to lives they have values that will last. and in their own way with humility will impress others and inspire them.

Jesus calls us to lives that have eternity stamped on them. there is another old adage 'there are no pockets in shrouds' there are plenty of things that cannot be taken into eternal life. our task under God's guidance is to find the things that can be.

Prayers – Contemporary Parish Prayers

60 Grow in faith

63 Follow Christ

67 To give ourselves to the ways of Jesus

71 To discover what tempts us and find strength

129 To set our eyes on the joys of Easter