

***Drawing Closer to God***  
Matthew 6:1-6, 16,-21  
Ash Wednesday, February 25, 2009

**I.**

Today is a solemn and significant day in the church. We enter in silence and prepare ourselves to be reverential. Later in the service we will receive ashes in recognition of our mortality, and recite a Litany of Penitence that is unlike any confession we make at any other time.

It is not a time to celebrate. No one goes to the drugstore to buy Ash Wednesday cards. You don't see any big Ash Wednesday sales in the malls. Celebration comes later, at Easter, but for now and for the next forty days we are called to examine our lives.

We search ourselves for those things that separate us from God. We ask ourselves whether the things we do during the week are consistent with the things we say in church on Sunday. And we try to recognize where the world's ways have taken priority over God's ways.

**II.**

The reading we heard from Matthew's Gospel is a good place to begin. And I should mention that this reading has a long history. It has been the reading appointed for every Ash Wednesday since the Episcopal Church was founded in 1789. Prior to that it has been the reading appointed for every Ash Wednesday in the Anglican Church since the first Book of Common Prayer in 1549. It also was read when the practice of Lent began in the ancient early church.

The reason for that is because Jesus focused on a basic conflict in our human nature. As he described the hypocrites also shined the spotlight on our own tendencies to do the right things for the wrong reasons. He recounted their artificial piety in sounding the trumpet when they gave alms, in being obvious when they prayed, and in wanting others to know when they fasted.

And those people certainly were good examples of inwardly prideful motives for outwardly holy actions, weren't they? They made big productions of their faith and religion because they wanted others to see them and be impressed by how religious they were, or so they thought.

But that really isn't the purpose of Lent, is it? We don't commit to a Lenten discipline just to impress others. We hope that during this time we can draw closer to God in truth, sincerity, and an honest assessment of how we are living our lives. And we cannot achieve that if our self-interest interferes with our self-examination.

**III.**

An old story might be an example of this. A priest was walking down a street at night when a fellow jumped out from a dark alley, pulled a gun and told the priest to hand over his wallet. As he started to do so, his coat fell aside and the robber saw that his intended victim was a priest.

Right away the robber put the gun away and said he was sorry because he didn't rob priests. The priest obviously was relieved, and as a gesture of Christian charity reached into his coat pocket, pulled out one of his cigars, and offered it to the other fellow. Well, wouldn't you know that the robber said he couldn't accept it because he had given up cigars for Lent.

What's wrong with that picture? Obviously, this fellow had the wrong idea about Lent. The problem in his life was something more serious than smoking cigars.

The same point can be made with other more likely examples. We hear about people who gave up alcohol or chocolate for Lent. And those might have been good things, depending on why

they did them. If it was because they believed it could draw them closer to God's will for them, or because they were giving greater care to their bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit, then perhaps they approached Lent in a Christian way.

If, however, they were done just to impress others, or so that they might be seen by others as godly people, then we might think they approached Lent in prideful and worldly way.

And alcohol and chocolate are only two frequently-used illustrations. There are many others, and all of our situations are different. We each are called to examine what we can do in our own lives to set aside impediments to having the relationship with God that he wants us to have, and to living the life that he wants us to live.

#### **IV.**

At the end of this homily I will invite you in the name of the church to the observance of a holy Lent. The words in our service will describe it as a Lent of self-examination and repentance, of prayer, fasting, and self-denial, and of reading and meditating on God's holy Word.

Those are the ways we seek God's will for us, and they are the ways through which the Holy Spirit makes that will known to us. They are the things we can do to help us draw closer to God.

I will repeat that. They are the things we can do to help us draw closer to God. The key words are "draw closer to God." If we take today's Gospel reading seriously, then drawing closer to God will be the reason behind what we have decided to give up, or start doing.

#### **V.**

So, today's Gospel emphasizes not only what we do, but also why we do it. And sometimes looks can be deceiving. Like the hypocrites, we can be tempted to look and act and sound like something we are not. But God is watching. God knows what's in our hearts. And especially at this time, he wants our hearts to be his.

I pray that we will treat this Lenten season as a time of preparation and transformation. It is not a time just to check some boxes on a list, or to dust off some old routines that we might think look good for Lent. And it certainly would not be a good idea to mock God with cynical humor that promises abstinence from something that we do not like or do not do anyway.

If we prayerfully seek God's will for us, remembering especially at this time our Lord's suffering and death, we can see more clearly and avoid the obstacles to a holy life that the world places in our path.

At the end of the day, if we search ourselves in prayer, if we are honest with ourselves and our Lord, and if we ask for guidance from the Holy Spirit, we will approach this Lenten season as our Lord intends. We will do the right things for the right reasons, and we will live more completely into the life our Lord holds out to us. *Amen.*