

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal”. If you attend a BCP communion service, these words will be familiar to you as they form one of the sentences read out by the priest following recitation of the Nicene Creed and as we approach the heart of the service.

But the words also bring to an incident in our office a number of years back when these words seemed at the time to be quite apt but as I could only remember them in part, I didn't try quoting them. One lunchtime, a person turned up unannounced in our reception area. Discarding my sandwich mid-mouthful and going to discover who he was, I found him looking around at the deserted reception area with a look of surprise and as I followed his gaze, I must admit that it didn't look great, having the air of abandonment from staff wishing to make the most of every moment the lunchtime break could provide. A slick operation we were most definitely not. He then turned to me and exclaimed that surely, we were leaving ourselves wide open to opportunistic thieves and the like by not having the main door locked. The words I have just read floated around the top of my head as I considered the array of battered filing cabinets, well used typewriters and dictation equipment, etc and decided that I couldn't really agree with him. It was just stuff and more damage would be caused by any locks being jemmied open and forceful entry than by the valueless items. There was no treasure there. I was relieved that the words hadn't quite come to me once he introduced himself as Father! Although It might have led to an interesting theological discussion.

But it is a fact that we frequently misdirect our thoughts on value to objects that can break, perish or be lost rather than focus on the treasures that are intangible and which Jesus is alluding to.

One thing Jesus was clear about was that He did not like showy religion. He was scathing about those who made sure their piety was seen. Among his followers there is to be no trumpets blown when alms are given, no standing on street corners when praying and no looking miserable when fasting. This was *hypocrisy* – literally the wearing of a mask. Praying, fasting, giving to charity were to be personal transactions between the believer and God.

What was at stake and what continues to be at stake for us as we enter Lent, is the extraordinary ability we have to turn even innately good action into opportunities for self-aggrandisement. We might look on our culture's obsession with celebrity with a superior smile and consider ourselves above it but the roots of our self-absorption go deep. We long to be noticed, respected, appreciated, admired. We want to see our name on the door. The essence of sin is addiction to self and whether this is expressed outrageously or with subtlety, it's a universal ailment. Its heart disease not skin blemishes. You see it in the many expressions of 'self' – selfish, self-centred, self-satisfied, self-opinionated, self-important, self-righteous, self-willed and so on.

As Christians, we follow a man who laid that 'self' down, who 'emptied' himself.....humbled himself.....became obedient to the point of death' (Philippians 2.7.8)

So, Lent is an opportunity for us to examine how far we remain addicted to self and whether we've discovered that this addiction is like having permanently high blood sugars – no matter how much you drink, your thirst is never sated.

Paul provides hints on how to be effective witnesses to the richness of Jesus' gospel with his counter-cultural advertisement for the lifestyle that effectively witnesses to this richness.

This lifestyle includes the need for perseverance during all kinds of difficulties, integrity in character and conversation and contentment even in times of pain and deprivation. Ambassadors to Jesus most effectively demonstrate the worth of being reconciled to God not by being fine and full, but by their faith when bruised and empty.

Jesus is not bothered by the notion of disinterested behaviour or 'altruism'. What he says is much more realistic. If we focus on struggling to clear our hearts of any desire to do something, so that we are acting from totally pure motives, we will always find a tiny corner of desire somewhere – even the desire to behave altruistically. Then, instead of looking away from ourselves and towards God, we find ourselves focusing back on ourselves again, wanting to please, not God, but our own ideal of lofty, disinterested action.

So Jesus gives us specific instructions about how to be sure of integrity, of the outward appearance being matched by the inner reality. So, when you give money away, don't trumpet the fact. The point is to try and match the outgoing, spontaneous generosity of God himself and the best way to be sure of that is to not talk about it.

The same applies to prayer. What you are in private is what you really are. Personal prayers should be as though talking to your closest confidante, no religious style words or phrases are needed here and even though Jesus in this chapter of Matthew is to give his disciples the words of the 'Our Father in Heaven', it is not an essential component of private prayer unless of course you find it a helpful prompt. Say it as you mean it and mean it as you say it.

Jesus doesn't say what kind of reward we should expect. And that too is part of the point. Simply knowing God better should be reward in itself. There may be other things as well. but you never know until you try. What is clear is that he is inviting his followers to a life in which inside and outside match perfectly, because both are focused on the God who sees in secret.

So, what's the take away from this – Lent is a time of preparation for Easter, an opportunity to deepen one's relationship with Jesus. Take the time to read one of the various Lent books on sale. I had a quick look last night on Google and there is a wide range of material on offer which you can either get through the post or through a Christian bookshop. St Andrew's in Great Missenden has an excellent selection. Or you could come to our Lent course starting next Wednesday. That way, come Easter morning you will awake in better shape: "to store up for yourself treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" and I'm sure its better that its in heaven than in a pile of old filing cabinets!
Amen