

Year A Ash Wednesday

Isaiah 58:1-12

2 Corinthians 5:20- 6:10

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

### **Our Lenten journey starts here**

Isaiah mentions trumpets in the first verse of our Old Testament reading, exhorting the people to 'raise your voice like a trumpet'. Matthew tells us, '...when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets...'

Trumpets can be used for warning, for repentance, and in some situations can be used to call people to worship and devotions. And yet, Matthew, in this continuation of the Sermon on the Mount, clearly states that we should not herald our faithful actions with the sound of trumpets, but we should carry out our faithful actions quietly, humbly and as far as is possible, in secret.

Isaiah was writing in a time of conflict caused by a yawning gap between the community's worship practices and the community's behaviours. On the one hand people came to the temple and worshipped and presented as pious folk, but after the worship had ended their behaviour no longer reflected kingdom values. The people were selfish. The people were violent. The people were unjust in their dealings with each other.

Isaiah cautions that even when people decide to fast, they are often serving their own interests. Isaiah says that God critically asks, 'Is this the fast that I choose?'

Matthew seems to emphasise Isaiah's message from God; live a faithful life not because you will look good in other people's eyes but because you wish to respond to God's love, through righteous acts of

peace and justice. It is these acts, done in love – and not for personal reward - that are pleasing in God's eyes. Only then will we have integrity in our faithfulness.

Matthew calls those who draw attention to themselves 'hypocrites', the origin of this word means 'people who act out a role on a stage'. Matthew warns that the hypocrites' stage was their religion. Matthew was calling into question the integrity of their motivations and it isn't too much of a stretch to read into Matthew's words that he observed that some loved to act out a role in public and had deceived themselves that they had a deep faith which informed their actions. And today, Matthew is challenging us as we enter into this penitential season of Lent to a period of reflection.

- ✝ To what extent are our motivations based on a misguided theology of rewards?
- ✝ Are our own efforts to please God ever free from our desire to receive God's blessing?
- ✝ Are our efforts to love one another skin-deep, and run the risk of self-deceit?

As children we learnt a lot about the 'rules' for living by being rewarded for good behaviour. In much the same way I had to house-train Misty here with lots of praise and rewards when she went to the loo outside. A reward-based system worked well for us as children and for Misty.

So, it is not surprising that as we grew up with such a system, we can still be motivated by transactional rewards. But that is not God's way.

In faith we feel called to acts of peace and justice for all of God's people and for all of God's creation because of our love of God and a deep desire to follow the way of Christ. This isn't and cannot be a transactional reward system.

Rather, as we grow in faith we chose to respond, our heart is transformed through God's love and our awareness of the Holy Spirit's indwelling.

Paul, in our epistle reading this evening (2 Cor 5:20) charges us to be 'reconciled to God, that we might 'become the righteousness of God'. Not a trumpet in sight, just a deep commitment to be reconciled to God, and in that relationship, to seek to respond in love, and in following the ways of Christ, to further God's kingdom on earth, not for our glory or for any sort of personal reward, but because it is the only response we can make, with a heart transformed by God's love.

In 2 Corinthians, St Paul has three themes. They are: (i) reconciliation with God; (ii) reconciliation through Christ; and (iii) having both inward and outward righteousness. He says that if we achieve these things we will have new life. God invites us to be a 'new creation' in Christ, where we are reconciled, renewed and transformed. We can only do this if we change our values and the thoughts that drive our behaviours, so our faith is shown to be worked out through our love for others.

During Lent we are encouraged to reflect, take stock, and prepare to journey with Christ to the Cross. There should be time for personal prayer, for worship, for personal reflection, for giving up old ways of thinking and doing, of loving more, judging less, of intentionally forgetting past grievances and hurts, of seeking to ask God to help heal and strengthen us, to heal and transform us, and ultimately find time to walk with Christ and learn from Him.

I commend this Lenten discipline to you.