

Worship in the Wilderness

First Sunday

Read: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

1 "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. 2 "Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 3 But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. 5 "And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 6 But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

16 "And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 17 But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 18 that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Some thoughts:

"Revealed: Government minister's secret child!"

"Corporation hides funds in secret off-shore account!"

It is not unusual to feel that we are bombarded with these kinds of headlines. Newspapers and websites hope to cash in on our natural curiosity around secrets. Very rarely do the headlines cry out: "Revealed: Government minister's secret habit of taking our neighbour's trash!" or "Corporation secretly invests funds in homeless shelter!" No, you can be sure that those kinds of things will not remain secret for very long.

Jesus' encouragement to us in Matthew 6 are so counter-cultural that they almost read like a joke, and it was the same in his own time. This passage is not only advice for engaging in spiritual practices, but perhaps also a critique of those who do it for their own gain. Jesus will have witnessed those individuals who arrived at the synagogue to give money to the poor, accompanied by announcements of their intentions. He claimed that these people had received their reward for doing good things already, as they were now honoured by the people around them.

Reflection:

Are there things that you do in order to impress other people? What areas are you most tempted to do this in -your work, family life, finances, good deeds, spiritual life, or some other sphere?

In the same way, the spiritual practice of fasting is not intended to be to impress others, but to seek God and to go deeper in prayer. Looking "sombre" and "disfiguring" yourself in public may not be so different to today's Christian posting their spiritual activities on Facebook or Twitter for all to see.

As we begin this journey of "Worship in the Wilderness" you may want to search your own motives: are you engaging with a Lent series because you want to draw nearer to God? Or because a leader told you to? Or because your small group will be impressed? James writes:

"Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up." (James 4:8-10)

Confess:

Use the space to ask God's forgiveness where your motives have been wrong. Then take a quiet moment to receive God's acceptance afresh, knowing that he will "come near to you" and "lift you up".

