

Bennochy Church: 26th march 2017

If you want to be noticed, arrive at a meeting late and make a big show of it. Lots of apologies, eye contact and make your way to the seat that causes most disruption, often right at the front. Sorry, sorry, sorry I am late. You have made your point. Everyone knows you have arrived. Some people just love to be the centre of attention. For them, no slipping in the back, quietly and unnoticed. If you are going to do something, everyone else might as well know all about it.

At first glance there seems nothing that really links Matthew's comments on giving, prayer and fasting, these were the basic components of Jewish piety, in order of their importance; giving, prayer and fasting, yet, there is a common thread that runs through his words. Matthew is saying, don't make a big show of what you do for God. If you are going to do it, do it in secret.

You can imagine the scene of the rich man, who in full glare of his audience, gives some money to someone in need. You could almost imagine him saying to the crowd, *'gather round, gather round and witness what I am about to do'*. His action is not actually about charity or compassion at all. He is saying, look at me and the kind of person I am. It is all about him and looking good for God, in front of others. The person in need, is just a prop for his own ego.

Matthew says, if you are going to do this, do it for the right reasons, which does not require you to do it in public. He says, this is not about personal prestige. It is not about, 'look at me and see how good I am'. Matthew says, not even your closest friends need to know about it, but God will see your generosity. You can almost imagine Jesus or Matthew standing in the streets of Jerusalem and witnessing this charade first hand, and shaking their heads.

'Hypocrite' is a powerful word. It is full of meaning and it has very negative connotations. In using this piece of very strong language, Matthew is challenging the actions of those who wanted to be seen. He is saying, this is not what God wants. If you are going to pray, go to your room, shut the door and pray to God unseen. There were those who loved to be heard, in synagogues, in the Temple and even on street corners! Prayers they thought would attract God's attention and the wonder of others, in just how pious they were. *'What language they are using! That is the kind of prayer God responds to!'*

Matthew says, no. Prayer is not about building up some kind of religious credit with God. If God already knows what we are about to say, then heart and motive are far more important to him than words. Prayers said just to get you noticed is an empty gesture. Prayer seeking no rewards, is about building a relationship with God.

Having said that, I was wondering, do these prayers hold any value or are they simply rejected by God? I don't know. Jesus does not say, except, it is those who pray in private and for the right reasons, who will be rewarded by God. The 'hypocrite' has already been rewarded in full, in this life. Strong words.

In first century Palestine fasting, was common and here Matthew is accusing those who used it as a deliberate act to get themselves noticed. Many of the most 'pious' people would fast, without water, maybe two days a week. It would take a toll on their health and people would see that. But they would also dress in a deliberately way, so that everyone knew they were fasting. They would even put on cosmetics, this is the men we are talking about, to make themselves look worse than they actually were. Imagine people watching and saying, '*What a holy person they must be!*' Matthew does not say fasting is wrong. He is not saying don't do it. Just don't do it to get yourself noticed. Following God is not about winning approval. Instead, no matter how you feel, dress smart, so no that one will ever know.

Jesus is making a point here against the actions and attitudes of certain people. He is saying, be careful. What people do, does not necessarily reflect their underlying motives. It is like putting on a mask.

The ironic thing is, we live in such a different culture, where instead of drawing attention to ourselves and our faith in God,

we tend to hide it. I can't imagine, although I might be wrong, many members of Bennoch church standing on the High street in Kirkcaldy and visibly and loudly praying to God so that all who pass by can see and hear them. We are Presbyterians after all! We don't do that kind of thing. But we all wear masks.

What we show to the outside world is often not what is going on inside us. We often do it to protect ourselves. It is natural defence mechanism when we are feeling vulnerable. It enables us not to have to share with others the reality of what we are living with. To the outside world the mask is fully on and we are 'OK'. "*How are you doing? Fine.*" But there will be times when the mask starts to slip, and people might get a glimpse of our real selves. What is going on and how we are feeling.

God is always behind our masks. The heart is known and motives exposed. Even as we hide from others, God says do not fear. Outward smiles and inward tears are both known to God. In our lives, God knows what is real.

Is there any place I can go to avoid your Spirit?

to be out of your sight?

If I climb to the sky, you're there!

If I go underground, you're there!

If I flew on morning's wings

to the far western horizon,

You'd find me in a minute—

you're already there waiting (psalm 139: 7-10)

