

**Isaiah 58:1-12**

*Shout out, do not hold back!*

*Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins.<sup>4</sup> Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.*

*<sup>6</sup> Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?*

*<sup>7</sup> Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them,  
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?*

*<sup>8</sup> Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing shall spring up quickly;  
your vindicator shall go before you,  
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.*

*<sup>9</sup> Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;  
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.*

*If you remove the yoke from among you,  
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,*

*<sup>10</sup> if you offer your food to the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,  
then your light shall rise in the darkness  
and your gloom be like the noonday.*

*<sup>11</sup> The LORD will guide you continually,  
and satisfy your needs in parched places,  
and make your bones strong;  
and you shall be like a watered garden,  
like a spring of water,  
whose waters never fail.*

*<sup>12</sup> Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;  
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;  
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,  
the restorer of streets to live in.*

## **Matthew 6:1-6 :16-21**

### **Concerning Almsgiving**

6 "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven." <sup>2</sup> So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>3</sup> But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, <sup>4</sup> so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

**Concerning Prayer** And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>6</sup> But whenever 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.

**Concerning Fasting** <sup>16</sup> "And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>17</sup> But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup> so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

### **Concerning Treasures**

<sup>19</sup> Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; <sup>20</sup> but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. <sup>21</sup> For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

## **Sermon, Ash Wednesday 17 Feb**

WE have all been into medieval cathedral, probably many, and alongside the chancel there are often double decker tombs from hundreds of years ago, remembering the great and the good.

There will be an elaborate one with a canopy and an effigy of say a bishop on his robes with a text or eulogy to remind people of his greatness.

Underneath there may be another layer with a skeleton carved, to remind people of this man's mortality as well as their own. You might call this a memento mori - a reminder of death. In times of early death and plagues, death was a close reality.

Different ages have faced the reality of death in different ways, and though today on the whole we don't discuss or face it very much - the pandemic has brought it home to us, how fragile life really is.

I say all this on Ash Wednesday when ashing is a "memento mori" and **if we were being ashed** These words would be said "God our father you create us from the dust of the earth, grant that these ashes may be for us a sign of our penitence, and a symbol of our mortality It is a solemn moment perhaps shocking, but not the last word, for the prayer goes on. **For it is by your grace alone that we receive eternal life through Jesus Christ our saviour.**

And other words to encourage are found in our readings for they offer practical ways to live in that grace during the time we live on earth.

Isaiah spoke furiously about the ways Israel was sinning "Announce to my people their rebellion to the house of Jacob their sins."

And the way they are dealing with it is false worship and fasting with just a day given to penitence, with lots of bowing and ashes - but no real showing of justice, mercy and compassion on those who need it.

Jesus is very specific about the way we can live to show penitence for our sins, and the sins of the world.

I would suggest that each of these ways is also a reminder of our mortality.

**Almsgiving** - how we give reflects both our relationship to God, and how we regard our possessions, however large or small they may be. whether we put coins in a slot - or less familiar - and rather at less personally by direct debit. Jesus was speaking especially to those who would make a great show of their alms giving. I bet they wouldn't have done it by direct debit when you don't know what a person has given.! Of course, the poor widow with her two farthings probably didn't have a bank account - so different guidance would apply

Giving away can also be a sacrifice both in the sense of something given to God, but also at cost to ourselves - a small death perhaps, as we deny something for ourselves

**Concerning prayer.** Again Jesus condemns those who showily and publicly show their piety, - not being able to meet together there is little chance of that at the moment, but giving up time - when we might be pleasing ourselves is something we can give to God. And the more we do it the more we will want to do it. I admit I don't spend very long over my prayers each day - but I know if I miss them the day is somehow incomplete and there is a nagging feeling of something incomplete -(Note to self - resolution this lent ) Prayer can also be action - **also** not instead when we make a visit or a phone call, when we give our time to a charity or a friend in need.

**Concerning fasting.** Again Jesus is condemning those of his time, who make a great show of fasting, which we probably would not do today. Though If combined it with a bit of weight loss,( I could brag about )can muddle the reasons why we may have given up something really pleasurable: or alternatively taking on something which takes our time. as fasting is a self-denial, and a physical reminder often of our less than perfect bodies - which today we are reminded will be dust one day.

**Concerning treasures.** We come back to the value we place of what we have. I am reminded of the verse from Timothy 6:7 "we bring nothing into the world, and we take nothing out" of course we don't physically, but what we do take, is the essential part of ourselves, and the part especially that relates to God and he knows everything about us.

These passages from the sermon on the mount reminds us again of how we can live in God's grace. Living like this is also costly in relation to the world, for our time, our talents and our material wealth.

They are also a reminder of the time Jesus spent in the desert, thinking through what was God's will for him. As we too try to live Gods way - knowing the way of Jesus, we shall meet opposition as she did

But Paul reminds us in Romans Chapter 12 <sup>37</sup>"No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup> For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup> nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Amen