

## Sermon Ash Wednesday — Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21 — 26/2/2020

In Geelong there is a boardwalk that goes around an enclosed section of beach set aside for swimming. To pay for the boardwalk people could donate money and have their names engraved on a board. There are other buildings and projects that you may have come across where people could have their name placed on a brick or a plaque to record the money they gave to the project. There is nothing wrong with raising money this way but it does say something about people and their desire for recognition.

**Most people want to be respected and acknowledged.** Most people care about what others think of them whether they admit it or not. And because we cannot look into another person's heart we tend to judge them by their outward actions. So we judge someone who publicly gives away thousands as more generous than the person who gives their money away without anyone knowing. We may even judge ourselves by how much we give because we are tempted to think that outward actions are more important than the inner motivation.

**We can even be tempted to judge the spirituality of others by outward actions.** We can be tempted to think that going to church every week automatically makes someone a better Christian and somehow more faithful than the person who struggles to get to church even once a month. We can be tempted to think that just because someone goes to all the mid-week Lenten services they must somehow be closer to God than those who never attend those services. We can be tempted to judge people's faith by how well they can pray out loud in the Bible study group or how well they know their Bible.

**Of course it is important to attend worship, to pray to God and to read God's Word, but these things do not guarantee someone's standing with God.** What really counts with God is where the person's heart is. What really counts with God is what is going on inside the person's heart and mind. The problem is that the Pharisees Jesus was talking about loved the respect and admiration of other people more than they loved God. They were far more concerned with outward appearances than they were with their inner relationship with God. For the most part they got just what they wanted. Jesus says that they got their reward. People looked up to them and spoke well of them. But Jesus saw through their actions. Jesus saw that their actions were not genuine at all. He saw that they were actually hypocrites.

**Jesus warns against any kind of religion that is hypocritical.** People are hypocritical when they pretend to be one kind of person when in fact we are completely different. The truth is that most people struggle with hypocrisy. We are hypocritical when face to face we are nice to people, while in private we talk behind their backs. We are hypocritical when at work or church we are all smiles and agreeable but once we get home we give our our spouse or our children a hard time. We are hypocritical when we spend hours in prayer, Bible study and worship but then under pay and over work our employees, or don't put in an honest day's work for our boss or overcharge our customers. We are hypocritical when we pray in the Lord's prayer, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us," and then continue to hold a grudge.

**God does not look at outside actions and appearances but rather God looks at the heart.** For example someone may give \$1000 to a particular charity and in their heart they think, "I don't care about this charity but I want to make an impression with this gift. I want others to know what I have given so they will think I am good and surely I will earn a few points with God for being so generous." Another person may give \$1000 to charity and in their heart think, "Wow God is good and he has been so generous to me, I want to give this money to so that I can share God's goodness and generosity with someone in need." On the outside the same money has been given but on the inside the motivation is very different. In one case the motivation is self-centred and hypocritical. In the other case the motivation is centred on faith in God.

If we take an honest look at ourselves most of us struggle with hypocrisy. Our motives are rarely pure and often a mixture of good intentions and a secret longing for approval and recognition. That is why we need Jesus. That is why we need to admit that on our own we have no hope of changing. Our only hope is to go to the foot of the cross and admit to Jesus that we need his help. Our only hope is to confess our sins, our inability to love God the way we should, our inability to love people the way we should. Our only hope is to ask God to forgive us and wash away our sin.

And when we turn to Jesus we find that he loves us and values us just the way we are. With Jesus we don't need to pretend. With Jesus we can be honest and open, admitting to our doubts, our failures, our deepest darkest sins. With Jesus we can take off the mask of our hypocrisy and learn a new way of being. With Christ we can learn to be genuine.

Today we begin the 40 days of Lent. Lent is a great time to learn to be genuine. Lent is a great time to be honest with ourselves and with God. During Lent we can practice coming to God with our failings, our sins, our inability to change our own hearts as we focus once again on the Christian journey. Today we are reminded that without God we are as good as dead in our sins. Without God we are nothing but dust. We are also reminded that there is redemption through Christ. That through repentance and forgiveness our hearts can and will be slowly but surely changed. As we daily repent, confess our sins and hear God's comforting words of forgiveness and love we will experience that change. And the more we experience God's love the more we will become people full of genuine love for God and others. **Amen.**

*Pastor Rolf Ljungqvist*