

Lent III

seek ye first his kingdom and his righteousness (Matthew 6.33)

This sermon is not on the readings, but an opportunity to recall some basics of the Christian life.

The Sermon on the Mount was first delivered to ordinary Jews, so both the Lord and his hearers accept that they will pray, and fast, and give alms - for a Jew can do these anywhere, however far from temple or synagogue.

The issue is not then whether to do so, or what the external acts will be (for these are unavoidable), but motive. The Father commands these acts of righteousness and will reward them, but that reward can be lost if they are done “before men”, that is to gain respect. Don't worry to the extent that people can't help knowing about our discharge of these duties - but don't go out of your way to be noticed if that might make other people think well of you (perhaps less of a problem for us in a post-Christian society than for the Lord amongst his people).

Much of this chapter, and not least the “Lord's Prayer”, turns upon our confident trust in the Father. We are not trying to extract favours from God but accepting his plan, his generosity. This is not easy, and that is why the Lord gave us a form of prayer, not just for repetition (though within two generations of the Resurrection Christians were already reciting it three times a day) but so that we should learn acceptance by the repetition.

It is hard for us to accept the Father's generosity. I know the temptation to “lay up treasure”, as I tend to add to my savings. I can argue that this makes it more likely that I can continue my ministry now that I can no longer finance it from work; I can argue that I must protect my wife if not myself; I can estimate what I spend in alms and on the priesthood; I can point out that the Lord and his disciples depended on the support of the rich - but all of this is wriggling. I expect we all share this experience, more or less.

On the other hand, we are not *all* called to abandon everything (though *some* individuals may be so called), but we are all called not to “be anxious” (“take no thought” is a mistranslation). St. Paul was savage about Christians who thought they need not work: “let them not eat” was his answer. For those still of working age, the point is to work honestly but not to make a great fuss about it. I wonder whether Christians ought to get to the top of their professions! The Father's generosity will give us enough.

The Lord was not telling all his hearers to give up managing their lives, but not to be anxious, for the Father knows our needs. That is why our prayers are to be so limited - give us this day the bread we need today, that and no more. Give us what is needed - on your terms and not the world's - and the grace to be relaxed and thankful. There is no promise of prosperity, that is a false gospel. There is a promise of enough.

Let there be no nonsense, however. Christianity does not shirk the idea of reward, though some think this an unworthy bribe. God is just as well as generous. If we act for God, we will come to love him, and even though we are “unprofitable servants”, we will not lose our reward. “To lay up treasure in heaven is to do acts which promote, or belong to, the kingdom of God; and what our Lord assures us of is that any act of our hands, any thought of our heart, any word of our lips, which promotes the divine kingdom by the ordering whether of our own life or of the world outside, is stored up in the divine treasure-house, and when the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem, shall at last appear, that honest effort of ours, which seemed so ineffectual, shall be found to be a brick built into the wall of that eternal and celestial fabric.” (Bishop Gore on this passage, probably consciously alluding to an idea in the “Shepherd” of Hermas.)