

secrets

a sermon preached on

Ash Wednesday

10 February 2016

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by the Reverend Dr Brian Porter

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Ps 51; 2 Cor 5: 20-6.10; Matt.6: 1-6, 16-21

Lord Jesus, Master, Carpenter of Nazareth, who through wood and nails wrought our redemption on the Cross: wield well your tools in this your workshop, that we who come to you rough-hewn, may be fashioned to a truer beauty, by your hand and for your sake. Amen

Jesus warns us to practise our piety *in secret*. We are not to give alms, to pray or to fast in order to impress other people. Instead we are to do these things *in secret* for as Jesus tells it: “your Father who sees *in secret* will reward you”.

So what we are doing today as we are symbolically marked with ash on our foreheads on this the opening day of the forty days of Lent, is not done to impress a human audience or even to impress our own vanity or even to win God’s favour. We are not in the business of earning divine Frequent Flyer Points. What God who *sees in secret* is God’s best-kept secret. Sigmund Freud, so wise and so insightful, taught that we are best to be known by our secrets. *Can you bear your own secrets?* Remember that God, as we rehearse at our Eucharists, is the One “from whom no secrets are hidden”.

So you give alms to help people in distress: refugee relief for example which is a pressingly immediate call upon *us* ever so rich Australians to give until it hurts and *God knows* we should be giving these days until it really does hurt. Therefore the divine imperative is that we should feed the hungry and homeless, visit the sick, befriend the lonely and do many kind deeds. When we in fact do these things we come to understand much better the raw edge of human need. Somebody else may be fed or housed or comforted, and we might feel good about this, but *are we being transformed?* Are we being made more compassionate than we would otherwise be? We may not receive a certificate of appreciation but our outlook on life and other people will be transformed. This is how God who *sees in secret* rewards us.

So this Ash Wednesday you might resolve to give until it hurts – \$500 instead of \$50! Or you might resolve to mend a broken family or an erstwhile good relationship gone temporarily sour, or a dead-as-dead relationship. Or to refrain from your besetting sins or faults whatever they may be. For example if you are normally stony-faced or grumpy, to smile more, to practise cheerfulness. And you might fast more seriously – I speak for myself – not just from avocado on toast or gin and tonics or books and delicious gossip. Whatever, don’t give up on nurturing your relationship with God which can so easily run hot and cold. After all, hunger for God is to be our default position, our healthy state, yet so often our hearts are stuffed with that which cannot ultimately nourish us. Through our fasting, God changes us. After all we are constituted not by our achievements or even by our failures, but by our dependence on God. Our hunger is not for bread alone, but for the holy.

So let me finish with this: what we are to seek is not a successful Lent, honouring a nagging checklist of what we have or have not done, a morbid consciousness of multiple backslidings, but a holy Lent, an exposure of our emptiness, so that each of us can be a place of resurrection.

God of Love, help us to be so mindful of the Love from whence we came, that we might learn more of the Love to which we go, and in this Love abounding daily abide, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen