

Ash Wednesday 2023

St Luke's Tutshill 22/2/23

## Matthew 6: 19-21 – Treasures in Heaven

Prayer

Here we are then – Lent. Time for us to be even more miserable than usual. Time to give something up so we can feel really bad now and when we come to Easter feel really good again, because we can pick it up – whatever the 'it' may be. Now is the time to feel really guilty that we have made a hash of following Jesus. No more Gloria, no more joy till Easter. I love the cartoon that read – *And one Lent Basil simply gave up...* Lent confirms what many people may suspect about being a Christian – negative, boring and best kept in a dark cupboard.

Or we could present another face. In our reading Jesus talks about fasting in such a way that no one can see it on our faces. Perhaps a good Lent resolution might be to present a joyful face to our neighbours? We will look at fasting but first to Matt 6: 19-21 – about our priorities. Jesus says, *Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth... but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven.* It's not hard to say Amen to that, but what about checking it against our priorities? I don't mean our priorities in our more pious moments. I mean our priorities. If I wanted to check out what is really important to you – and the same would be true in reverse – I think I would need to look at three things – to visit your home and look around, to have your diary for the last year and your bank statements. I think if you did that to me, you would have a fair idea of my priorities. I'm not sure I'm going to offer them though!

Jesus – as always – cuts to the heart of the matter. Where is your treasure? In his time it was really difficult for rich people to protect their wealth – no locks on doors, no banks, no safes. Wealth was very precarious. We assume it's safer now – everything on line, but you still can't take it with you, and it matters little in the face of life and death. Where is your treasure? What are your priorities? It's a very personal question, I know, but Jesus was constantly asking personal questions and telling the disciples to go away and work out the implications. Jesus did not present a blueprint for disciples. He did not make clones. He told the rich young ruler to go and sell everything he had and give to the poor. To Zacchaeus he simply declared forgiveness and left him to work through what it meant – he then returned his ill-gotten gains, but Jesus didn't tell him to do that. To Nicodemus, another wealthy man and a member of Jerusalem's elite he said, *You must be born again.* To each of these men Jesus spoke as an individual.

And each of them had to work it out for themselves – what was their treasure, and what were their priorities? Jesus asked the question and left them to work out the answers – what they would do. Now for the most part I imagine that we get on with life without worrying too much about the big questions. We have our routines and we have our choices. It's great that we have come to church on this Ash Wednesday, which suggests that we are serious about being Jesus' disciples. And Lent is the 40 days of the year when we are encouraged to look at our priorities.

And this helps us to see what fasting is about. Now fasting is not popular among many Christians. Some have told me that they don't see the point. Joni Mitchell once sang, *You don't know what you've got till it's gone...* Fasting is not about giving up something that is wrong. That's repentance, and part of the deal of becoming a Christian in the first place. Fasting is about voluntarily giving up something that is fine in itself. It can be for a short time. It can be for longer. But why? Well, Paul writing to Timothy put this, *if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.* Actually it

probably means more than just clothing; it includes basic shelter. I am sure that in theory we would all like to be content with just what we need. Actually Paul forgot to mention books. Fasting – whether that is about some food, alcohol, internet, TV, some adjustment to our routines – whatever is an exercise in honesty. How about fasting as an exercise in testing what is important to us? It is not an end in itself, and it is certainly not about making ourselves feel better or worse; in fact it's not about *us* at all. It's reminding us that what really matters is what Jesus gives us – storing up treasures in heaven.

Proud grandad warning. My 10-year old grandson Evan is a whizz on the Rubik's cube; he was in a national competition a couple of weeks ago and got his personal best time of 16 seconds. He tells me he has to memorise a series of algorithms to get there, and you've lost me there. Follow those algorithms and out pops a completed Rubik's cube. Jesus does not provide his disciples with any algorithms – he has given us the Holy Spirit. He has given us the freedom and the responsibility to work out what it means to be a disciple in practice. And our service this evening and the season of Lent is our opportunity to do just that – it's a lens or maybe a mirror – for us to look at our lives and our priorities in the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Perhaps we could start by looking afresh – maybe at our homes, our diaries and our bank statements?

Prayer