

(Yr B) ASH WEDNESDAY

(FEBRUARY 17TH, 2021)

Readings: 2 2:12 – 18; Psalm 50 (51); 2 Corinthians 5:20 – 6:2; Matthew 6: 1 – 6, 16 – 18.

Today's gospel reading often puzzles regular churchgoers. We hear our Lord in the Sermon on the Mount, telling his disciples that their religious disciplines must be different from those of the *hypocrites*: Their almsgiving must *be in secret*; Their praying must be private; Their fasting too must not be *seen by men*. But today those of us who are able will meet together for public prayer. We'll be encouraged to take part in parish schemes of giving to support this or that charity. We'll be marked on our foreheads with a cross of ash, made from last year's palms. And it will have struck most of us, at one time or another, that we're doing exactly what our Lord tells us not to do. But that isn't really the case. The practices Jesus was condemning were not the public acts of the whole community – public prayer in the Synagogue, the regular fast days like the Day of Atonement, and the annual temple tax. He was speaking about personal acts of almsgiving, prayer and fasting, voluntarily undertaken by individuals over and above those which were to be observed by the whole community.

So our joint charitable giving, our communal prayer, and the Lenten fast observed by us all are not being criticised by Jesus. What he condemns is the way *hypocrites* perform their personal acts of devotion. The Greek word we translate 'hypocrite' commonly meant an actor – someone wearing a mask to play a part in a play in front of an audience. Matthew uses the word 'hypocrite' in a more general sense (as in chapter 23), but here, in today's Gospel reading, the meaning of 'someone putting on an act for others to see' fits exactly the point Jesus is making: *Be careful, he says, not to parade your good deeds before men to attract their attention.*

We are called – perhaps particularly in this Lent, when many of us are in some sort of lockdown – to undertake our 'good deeds' solely in the sight of our Father in heaven. It is his judgement on our actions alone that matters, for it is to him that we need to be reconciled in Christ *the sinless one*. In his appeal to the Christians of Corinth Paul begs them *not to neglect the grace of God*, but to realise that *now is the favourable time; this is the day of salvation.*

And that is precisely what Lent is: not a time for putting on an act – for others or for ourselves – but the time to accept once again the grace of God, freely given to us in Jesus Christ.