

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

The Lectionary we now use for the readings at mass differs in significant two ways from the version in older liturgies for Ash Wednesday. The Gospel Reading in both lectionaries comes for the Sermon on the Mount, but while the earlier lectionary gave us only the verses about fasting (together with a passage about true treasure) the version we shall hear today speaks of the three Jewish practices which Matthew wished his Jewish-Christian hearers to continue. These three spiritual disciplines were Almsgiving, Prayer and Fasting, and they went beyond the commands of the Law of Moses. Nor were they part of the corporate life of the community – like Sabbath observance or celebrating festivals. They were voluntary actions taken on by those, like the Pharisees, who wished to live a more disciplined spiritual life.

Luke's Gospel gives us a parable which depicts just such a Pharisee. He is saying his personal prayers in the Temple., and boasts *I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get.* Matthew has just the same sort of people in mind: Their almsgiving, their personal prayers and their fasting are all *good deeds*, but they *parade* them in public, so that they will be noticed by others.

Neither Luke in his parable nor Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount suggests that voluntary devotions which go beyond what the community does together are in themselves bad – rather the reverse: they are *good deeds*, but to deserve a reward they must be done privately, so that *your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you.*

Whatever extra discipline we have taken on ourselves this Lent, we need to heed Matthew's warning to those who forget that *good deeds* are done for the love of God, not for the instruction of others: *I tell you solemnly (he says) they have had their reward.*

Of course, none of this applies to the things we do as part of the Church community. Mass on Sundays and Great Feasts, Stations of the Cross, self-denial on Fridays and receiving the ashes which give today its name – all these are God-given ways in which we grow together as the Body of Christ, which is another way of thinking of the purpose of Lent.