

Sermon for Ash Wednesday, 2nd March 2022, Year C

Preached at All Saints Biddenden and St Michael Smarden

Isaiah 58:1-12; Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

Sermon

In 1959 Audrey Hepburn starred in a movie that she would later often say was her absolute favourite. It was called “A Nun’s Story” and in it, Hepburn played a young woman, the daughter of a famous surgeon, who decides to become a nun in a nursing order of sisters, with the desire to be posted to the Belgian Congo to care for patients with infectious diseases. The film covers the period from when Hepburn’s character, who took the name Sister Luke, first enters the order as a postulant and novice, and follows her life as she struggles to learn obedience and humility while studying medicine.

At first, everything goes well for her. She is her father’s daughter and very gifted academically. She soon takes it upon herself to help the less able sisters with their studies. What could be more worthy of God’s calling? Here is a young, attractive and intelligent woman, from a good and well-regarded family, giving up all the selfish pleasures her life might have afforded in order to serve the poor and sick in Africa.

And then comes the scene in the movie that I can never quite forget, especially given my own two years living as a nun. Sister Luke is due to take her final medical exams, and everyone expects her to pass with flying colours. Even the examiners mention their friendship with her father and the pleasure they will take in informing him of his daughter’s great success. What they don’t know is that Sister Luke has been instructed by her Mother Superior to deliberately fail the exam, both as an act of humility, and so the less able sisters might feel better about themselves.

This really went to the heart of Sister Luke's sense of identity. She was even forbidden to tell anyone, including her father, the reason why she had failed the exam. She would have to carry that shame alone, with only God and the Mother Superior knowing the real reason.

As it turned out in the film, Sister Luke couldn't bring herself to accept the humiliation of failure and she passed the exam with flying colours. Her inability to embody the humility expected of her by the order haunted her from that point on, and I hope I am not spoiling anyone's enjoyment of the film by saying that eventually, after many inner struggles, she decides to leave and return to secular life.

This all painfully reflects my own experience of being a novice nun. I may have looked holy on the outside, but on the inside I was motivated almost entirely by what other people thought of me, and what I thought of myself. I quite enjoyed that I was given the most menial jobs in the kitchen and the laundry, because then I got to look humble, but I still wanted to be thought well of, so I tried to be the perfect laundress, ironing and folding everything flawlessly, or the perfect cleaner, scrubbing the Aga as if it were a Rolls Royce. Without an audience, what is the point of being humble?

Our gospel reading today covers exactly this dilemma. Jesus is speaking in a first century Mediterranean culture which is fixated on social honour and patronage. Your place in this society revolves entirely around visible acts of paying honour to others and receiving honour in return. Thus, being seen by others while performing pious acts is precisely what you *wanted* to happen. If no one was watching, acts of benevolence were entirely wasted.

Jesus makes it clear that this is absolutely not the sort of piety and righteousness that *God* has in mind. And we only have to go back to our reading from the prophet Isaiah to see that God has been saying the same thing for an awfully long time.

Isaiah brutally mocks the words of a people who are complaining that their piety has gone unnoticed: *'Why do we fast, when you do not see? Why humble ourselves, when you do not notice?'*

And then he has God reply: "Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day, and oppress all your workers... Is such the fast that I chose?"

Then through Isaiah, God follows up with one of the most withering critiques of those who think they are righteous, anywhere in the bible:

"Is not this the fast that I choose," he says, "to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?"

But... wait a minute! Hasn't Jesus just been saying that doing good works in public is wrong? Practice your piety in secret, he says, so that the heavenly Father who sees in secret will reward you. How does this fit with Isaiah's call to these very public acts of justice and mercy?

On the one hand Jesus is telling us to hide our good works, but at other times he's telling us to do them extravagantly: to turn the other cheek, to go the second mile, to hand over your cloak as well if someone demands your coat, to love your enemies, to put your light on a lampstand for all to see, for goodness' sake.

We have this apparent contradiction in our own modern practices as well. Traditionally on Ash Wednesday we hear these scriptural arguments against showing off our piety, and then we put a big, blatant ash cross on our foreheads before popping to the shops. Look how holy we are, as we stock up on bread and milk! But aren't we doing exactly what God tells us not to?

The only way, I think, to resolve this paradox, is to realise that the issue is not who sees us as we do good works, but what our motivation is for doing them. It's easy to twist the commands and instructions of the bible into something that makes us look good and raises our status in other people's eyes! Even holy nuns fall prey to this one, let me assure you. At Malling Abbey, they had to ban personal fasting because the nuns were too tempted to try to outdo each other in eating as little as possible. Competitive holiness!

So, the question we continually have to ask ourselves is this: 'Whose opinion do we really care about when we do the good works that God asks of us?' If we're truly acting from love of God and love of neighbour, then it won't matter who sees us, or who doesn't see us. It won't occur to us to wonder what people are thinking of us, because we're not thinking of ourselves at all.

This, I think, is the true challenge for all of us who call ourselves Christians and seek to follow the way of Jesus. Can we truly forget ourselves and think only of the good of others? If we can, then everything we do will become a pure act of love, and then as Isaiah says, "*your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.*"

Every year, the season of Lent gives us a chance to reflect on this beautiful calling from God to forget ourselves and to follow Jesus to the Cross. It is not a journey we can make under our own strength. If we try, we'll simply end up admiring our own efforts, or hating ourselves for our failure. As the nuns always said to me, don't think of yourself too highly, and don't put yourself down, but rather, don't think of yourself at all. Instead, in Lent and always, we should gaze continually on Christ in quiet prayer, and forget everything but his love. Amen.