

A sermon preached by Bishop Christopher on Ash Wednesday at Coventry Cathedral

5th March 2014

Readings: Joel 2.1-2, 12-17; Matthew 6.1-6, 16-21

The treasure of the Church

'For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.' (v 21)

Last weekend I visited a parish in the diocese whose patron saint is the second century martyr, St Laurence. When ordered by the prefect of Rome to give up the treasures of the church, St Laurence gathered together all the poor and the suffering and presented them to the prefect, saying "these are the true treasures of the church".

It is a very good thing that this year, during Lent, there seems to be a focussing of national attention on the poor.

- We have the End Hunger Fast campaign, calling out to the country to stand in solidarity with those who go hungry.
- There is a public debate about child poverty. People are daring to speak out and bring to light horrific cases of abuse and neglect.
- And there's a renewed attention to the massive and rising income inequalities in our society.

Every year, and especially this year, Lent calls us to focus on the poor of our city, of our nation and throughout the world.

The Challenge of Lent

In our gospel reading, Jesus lays down the challenge of Lent: to re-examine our lifestyle.

'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.' (vv 19-21)

Lent asks us where our treasure lies.

The Tool of Lent

Through fasting, Lent gives us a tool to help us re-examine our lifestyles and to discover where our addictions lie. Fasting can also help to show us that we do not need to be addicted to plenty; that there are earthly things that we need not treasure.

I've noticed that a lot of bishops give up alcohol for Lent – and I try to be one of them. I wonder whether this is inspired by Titus 1.7: *'For a bishop, as God's steward, must be blameless; he must not be arrogant or quick tempered or addicted to wine...'*

Going without things over Lent, living on less, is a tool to help show ourselves that we need not be addicted to plenty. It is possible to live on less. And we discover that less is very often more.

The Attitude of Lent

As well as being a *tool* of Lent, fasting also tells us something about the *attitude* of Lent, or if you like, the beatitude – the blessedness – of Lent, and the way that we can live Lent-like throughout the year.

The word fasting comes from the Old English word 'faesten' which means both abstaining from something and being firm, or fixed tight; what we now mean by fastening.

So somehow through fasting, we are making something firm, holding something fast; fastening or securing it. The real challenge of lent is to fasten our sights, to fasten our action and to fasten our lives on the will and way of God:

- the will and way of God for ourselves
- the will and way of God for the Church
- the will and way of God for the world and especially for the poor.

How can we secure the best future for the hungry and for the homeless? And how can we treasure the neglected and abused child?

How can we starve our sins and starve the sins of our church and our society, so that we can emerge as the people, the church and the society that God wants us to be?

Conclusion

That fasting, that fastening of the will, begins as we remember that we are but dust and to dust we shall return. And it begins as we remember that our only hope is in Jesus Christ and our only way is through living in him.