

Sermon

Ash Wednesday 2025 March 5, 2025

Matt. 6:1-6, 16-21

“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them.”

This directive by Jesus instructs us to not wear our faith or religion on our sleeves. In other words, PDRs – public displays of religion – have more to do with being noticed by others than with our relationship with God. Normally this is pretty easy for Episcopalians – really, how many times have you talked with anyone about your faith, let alone invite them to church? But on Ash Wednesday this becomes a little more difficult when we all leave here with ash crosses on our foreheads.

What do we then say about practicing our piety before others? Well, for starters, we can remember that context is everything, so we need to pay attention to the whole sentence. The problem doesn't lie in practicing your piety before others; the problem lies with practicing your piety before others **in order to be seen by them**. We need to remember that the crosses imposed on our foreheads are not there to remind people how pious we are – they are there to remind us.

They are there to remind us that we are mortal. We are born, we live, and we die. We were formed of the earth, and to earth shall we return. Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. This mortality of ours, rather than being a morbid fascination, reminds us that life is fleeting and challenges us to live a life that shines the light and hope of God onto a very dark world.

They are there to remind us that we belong to Christ. At our baptism, we were sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own for ever. We are anointed with holy oil and the priest uses that oil to mark our foreheads with the sign of the cross. That holy cross, invisible to us, is visible to Christ and the spiritual powers of the world showing us to be holy people of Christ. And on Ash Wednesday we receive a very visible cross reminding us that we were sealed and marked as Christ's own for ever.

They are there to remind us that the path to life lies through death. To get to Easter, we must go through Good Friday. They remind us that to follow Christ requires us to take up our cross. They remind us of Christ's sacrificial love.

So while we don't have ash crosses placed on our foreheads to be seen by others, others will see us. That visible sign is a mark that we have been set apart. That visible sign can be a conversation starter about faith and practices. It may also serve as the basis for an invitation to come and see what this is all about.

On this Ash Wednesday we are reminded that we are but dust and to dust we shall return. We are reminded to make a right beginning as we begin our Lenten journey. We are reminded of sacrifices made not for the sake of being miserable, but for the sake of making a lasting change. And we are reminded that we do what we do not to be seen by others but recognizing that others will see us.

On this Ash Wednesday, may we begin to live lives worthy of Christ's sacrifice and the cross we wear.