

Sermon Lent 3 Year C 2022

You would have heard the saying, and you may have even used it yourself: *be careful what you wish for*. There is a growing *wish* in the public sphere, supported by the mainstream media, that Christianity – and any faith – ought to keep their noses out of public life. Behind this wish - as I have said before - is the mistaken view that faith and spirituality is ultimately a private affair, and so should have no bearing on public life. But just imagine for a moment if the wish did come true. Just imagine if Christians were forced, by legislation or public pressure, to step definitively out of the public sphere. The trendy lefty media might celebrate their wish fulfilment, but what would be consequences?

Well, thousands of schools and hundreds of hospitals would close. Agencies which support the homeless, the poor, the disabled, the elderly, refugees, and drug addicts would, by reason of the argument, have to close. On an international level, no other single agency has more health clinics for the poor, supports more people living with AIDS in Africa, assists more orphans of war, or works for justice in areas of conflict, or educates the young *than the church*. And if the church were forced to step out of the public sphere, we could well ask the question: so, who is going to pick up the tab?

Not so long ago, a study was published examining the numbers, lifestyles and self-perceptions of American atheists and agnostics in contrast to those who actively participate in the Christian faith. While the study comes from the US, I suspect many of the results would resonant here. The “No-Faith” segment was defined as anyone who openly identified themselves as an atheist, an agnostic, or who specifically said they have “no faith.” “Active Faith” was defined as simply having gone to church, read the Bible and prayed during the week preceding the survey.

Both “No-Faith” and “Active Faith” groups were equally “likely to *think* of themselves as good citizens, to *perceive* themselves as placing their family first, as being loyal and reliable individuals, as preferring to be in control, and as being leaders,” and they reported comparable personal difficulties including serious debt and addiction.

However, additional results show that there are some significant, and important, *differences*. “No-Faith” individuals were less likely than active-faith Americans to describe themselves as “active in the community” (41% versus 68%). They are less likely than active-faith Americans to personally help or serve a homeless or poor person (41% versus 61%). They are less likely than active-faith Americans to volunteer to help a non-church-related non-profit (20% versus 30%). The typical no-faith American donated just \$200 to charitable causes, more than *seven times less* than the amount contributed by the typical active-faith adult (\$1500). Even subtracting church-based giving, active-faith adults donated twice as many dollars to charitable causes than atheists and agnostics. 22% of “no-faith” adults failed to contribute *any* personal funds to charitable causes at the time of the survey, compared to only 7% of active-faith adults. Atheists and agnostics were more likely to be focused on acquiring wealth than Christians (10% versus 2%).

Many of these statistics seem to indicate that, *despite loud and insistent claims to the contrary*, atheism on the whole does in fact tend to be *less* family oriented, less involved in the community and civic life, and less compassionate and generous. And so goes some way to support the argument that at least some kinds of morality or generosity requires a foundation in Faith.

For the follower of Jesus, of course, this should come as no surprise. It is part of our spiritual DNA, if you like. In this third exploration of some traditional Christian disciplines, we consider today almsgiving, or works of mercy. But why is the practice of mercy and generosity so foundational to Christian life? The Scriptures, again, take it as a given. It is not viewed as some optional extra. Theologically, it is important because it recognizes that nothing we have really belongs to us. It brings us straight back to the story of creation in Genesis in which we are told that life itself is God’s gift to us. The human instinct, though, is to resist this truth. And so we expend so much energy and effort in trying to possess, to own, to hold and cling on to what we have. The discipline of almsgiving gently tries to prise open those tightly-closed fingers. Everything *we think* we own belongs to God. We are simply stewards of God’s gifts. Christian almsgiving and works of mercy help us distinguish between building our own kingdom and building the kingdom of God.

In Lent we hold before us and journey towards the Cross of Christ: the eternal sign of God's love for us. Our works of generosity and mercy are *a response* of love to the God of love. God who loves *unconditionally* – and that's important: *unconditional love* – invites us to *share* in this work of love. So, we do not give, we do not share God's love, expecting *anything* in return. It means we *do not* commit to works of mercy expecting a pat on the back and a boost to our egos. We do not commit to works of mercy expecting conversion, or expecting that people join us in the faith and come into our churches. We commit to works of mercy simply as an act of love. This can be a bitter pill to swallow for many in our churches. Because so many of us engage in the church's works and activities in the secret (or not so secret) hope that the fruit will be extra bums on seats, or increased recognition, or a special plaque...

Of course, it is great when someone responds and wants to share in the community that inspires this love. But this not our concern. The aim of our charity is not in fact evangelical – not to convert. And not 'community engagement', a favourite buzz word, which appears to emerge when a church has lost faith in what it is really all about. The church doesn't exist for community engagement! It exists for the glory of God. And the aim of our charity is simply to love as God has loved. And because God reveals the fullness of this love in the Cross, we might expect that our sharing in God's work of love to be costly for us as well.

The more we consider the authentic shape of Christian charity, the more we see the connection between the Christian practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. If we get so caught up in works of mercy and of doing good, we get caught in the trap of activism. And so the need for prayer to anchor our activity. But likewise, there is no point in trying to build and strengthen our inner life by prayer and fasting if there is no real, concrete manifestation of the change being affected. And as fasting seeks to liberate us from living for ourselves in self-indulgence, so almsgiving is the fruit of that insight, where we give of ourselves. All three point to our allegiance to God, that we *do not* belong to ourselves or to anything, that we *are not* our own highest authority. Prayer, fasting and almsgiving remind us that we are bound together as surely as we are bound to God.

The fig tree in today's gospel is given a year's grace to bear fruit. Lent is that time when the tree of our own souls and bodies can be given a deep water, when we prune back, fertilize. Perhaps the world is so ready to dismiss the presence of the church in the world because it doesn't perceive our fruit. As I outlined at the outset there *is* much fruit in the church, much we can rightly celebrate and give thanks to God for. The trouble, then, for us is that often we leave it to the 'experts' imagining *others* will carry our obligations. So often we outsource our Christian duty, even more difficult in our context of social security and the welfare state and the like. But we are children of the Cross. The challenge of Christian life is that the Cross shape all our hearts and lives. That means it cannot be outsourced. It means costly self-giving. It means sacrifice. But the cross also means, in the wonder of God's plan, glory and life.

Amen.