

What matters most? What's on the outside? Or what's on the inside? Is faith supposed to be about the internals or the externals?

That was a problem Jesus had to deal with. In the Greco-Roman world of the first century, religion was never about faith or belief. It was about what you did. It didn't matter what you believed as long as you engaged in the correct religious observances. Internal faith didn't matter, as long as you were engaged in the correct external ceremony.

But before we start getting all smug and contented with ourselves, let me remind you that we Episcopalians often face a similar challenge. We often get so tied up in the mechanics of our beautiful liturgy and in the words of our magnificent prayer book that we forget what our liturgy and our prayer book are there for. The purpose of our worship is worship. The reason we have our liturgy is not so that we can read beautiful and tasteful prayers. It is so that we can offer our worship to God. If we ever get more concerned with HOW we're worshipping instead of WHY we're worshipping, we've missed the boat.

Which brings us to Ash Wednesday. Ash Wednesday is the one day of the year when we follow the ancient Jewish custom of covering ourselves in ashes as a sign of our penitence. Of course, as Episcopalians, we're a little more tasteful about the whole matter. Instead of dumping ashes all over ourselves, we, settle instead for a small cross of ashes on our foreheads. But we mustn't forget the reason why we're using ashes.

The ashes are a reminder of two things. 1) They remind us of the fact that we are finite mortal creatures made of dust and ashes. And 2), the ashes remind us that we need to repent of our sins. The ashes are not a sign that we are good Episcopalians who have been to church on Ash Wednesday. If we think that, then we've missed the point of both the OT and the Gospel lessons.

The prophet Joel calls the people to repentance. "Even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning." But then there's something more that the Lord is asking.

The next line is, "Rend your hearts and not your garments." The message is clear. God doesn't want our penitence to be only on the outside, in a torn piece of cloth, or a bit of ashes on the foreheads. God wants us to repent at our very core, at the center of our being. Tear your hearts, not your clothing. That's the message from Joel.

Likewise, in our Gospel, Jesus cautions us about the danger of making an external show of our religion, when what God really wants is our hearts.

Jesus says, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven." Then Jesus has a long list. When you give money to the poor, don't do it for recognition. It's better to do it secretly, so that your left hand won't even know what your right hand has done. When you pray, don't do it so that you will be seen by others. Instead do it secretly, behind closed doors if you have to. When you fast, don't make a show of it. Instead look and behave normally on the outside. Do all of these things not in public, but in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

For Jesus it's a matter of priorities. Are we doing these things to impress others on earth, or are we doing these things to offer worship to God? If you make a big show about practicing your religion, then you will receive a certain kind of reward: people will say, "Gosh, isn't such and such a holy person." Jesus cautions us from trying to win such earthly rewards. Being changed, being penitent is not about things on the outside. Lent is not about externals. It's what's on the inside that counts.

When I was a kid, though, I had a completely different idea about what Lent was all about. Lent meant that I had to give something up. It also had to be something I liked. My parents would never let me give up broccoli or green beans. It was always something that I liked, like ice cream. So as a kid I would wonder, "What's so nasty about ice cream? Is Mint Chocolate Chip inherently sinful?" (Well, as a kid I probably wouldn't have used the word 'inherently,' but the thought was the same.)

I missed the whole point. Fasting is not about ice cream or cheesecake being evil. The discipline of fasting is all about remembering that we ultimately rely upon God, not upon food, to comfort and sustain us.

In the same way, the discipline of giving to the poor is not about being guilty for having money. Instead, alms-giving is part of our call to be stewards, to share the riches God has given us with those in need.

Disciplines of taking on extra time for prayer and Bible reading are not about making us go through drudgery. Instead, spending time in prayer and meditating on God's Word are ways that we attempt to draw closer to God.

It's not an external show that God wants. God wants internal change. During Lent, we are called to invited to change at our very centers. We are called to rend our hearts. We are called to offer prayer. We are called to give generously to the poor. We are called to do these things for one reason only, because we love God. "Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven," Jesus says, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."