



*16 Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. 17 But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; 18 That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly* (Matt 6:16-18)

### *The Eighth Sunday after Trinity.*

#### *The Collect.*

**O** GOD, whose never-failing providence ordereth all things both in heaven and earth; We humbly beseech thee to put away from us all hurtful things, and to give us those things which are profitable for us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

This Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican reveals God's thoughts on inordinate pride and worldly success as a measure of godliness. It also dispels the notion that a person of position in the church is somehow more righteous than the lowliest vagrant who comes in from the street to receive Christ as Lord and Savior. In fact, a person of high position in the church may be just as dead as a door nail while those of low esteem may be regarded with great love and dignity by God the Father.

### **HOW MUST WE FAST?**

Fasting is a subject that has been controversial in its practice and expression in times past. If long held beliefs, anchored in tradition, conflict with the clear word of God, which course should we take? I hope no reader of this devotion would opt for tradition over scripture lest you find yourselves in the same clan as the man of great error, the Roman Pontiff. Where God's Word is clearly and emphatically asserted, we must conform thereto. Our Lord very clearly articulates both the practice and attitude that we must take in fasting. Admittedly, a number of errors have grown up over time that seem to have the warrant of propriety due to the prominence they have been given and the long history of their practice; however, just because an error has been long established does not reduce its offense in the eyes of God. We have long practiced the process of applying ashes to our faces on Ash Wednesday, but does that practice meet

with the clear instruction our Lord gives in Matthew 6:16-18? Do those small dabs of ash on our foreheads reveal to the world that we are in a mourning and fasting condition? Is it not a means of showing others that we are righteous to fast?

**16 *Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward*** Does the application of a tiny patch of ash on the forehead not 'disfigure' our faces for the purpose of 'showing' others that we are observing the fast. It is my belief that the spirit of our Lord's teaching tells us that it is better that no man knows that we fast, especially from some outward sign thereof (***they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward***)

I do not say that ashes are wrong in fasting, but if we are going to follow in the Old Testament tradition, let's do as others such as the King of Nineveh and his people did when he and his people repented of their sins. What did that king do? ***So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them. For word came unto the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered him with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.*** (Jonah 3:5-6) If a tiny dot of ash on the forehead is pleasing to God, I want to do as the King and people of Nineveh did and sit me down in an abundance of ash to please Him. But, in actuality, Jesus does not require that outward form. It is not a sacrament required. But if the positing of a dot of ash is NOT tradition only, but biblical, could some reader point out the scriptural passage to me that requires the dot?

**17 *But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face;*** It was a custom in olden days, before we had Wildroot Cream Oil, to anoint ones head instead with oil to improve appearance. It was also a custom to wash one's face to be presentable in pleasant company. Anointing of one's head was not a sign of sorrow or fasting, but often of happiness. But wait! If we wash our face BEFORE fasting, might that not remove that little dot of ash on the forehead? If we wash that spot off, we may no longer appear as if we have just been shot in the forehead by a 38 caliber pistol. We couldn't have THAT could we? We would never be accepted at Oxford, or even Rome, without the tiny dot now would we? Do you see the absurdity and silliness of the dot? If it adds some dimension of spirituality to your soul to bear the dot, by all means, do not let me discourage you. But at least give some heed to the words of Christ regarding the efficacy of the practice. Perhaps a better place for the trace of ash would be at some point where the eyes of man could not see "perhaps in the hidden chambers of the heart.

I will ask the question that is begging here: Why wash the face before fasting? How readest thou? **18 *That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly*** Do we need to boast of our giving of alms; ..of our fasting; ..of our persistent prayers? To whom do we give alms "to man or God? To whom do we offer our prayers "to man or God? For whom do we fast in Lent "for man or Christ? If we do these things for men, we should show men that we do them; but if for God, we should leave it a matter between Him and us. The only exception is communal worship in which we offer our prayers and alms in unison. God sees every secret thing of our hearts. He even knows our petitions in prayer before we offer them. Are we fearful that God will not know that we fast? Must we place a dot on our foreheads to herald the fact to Him lest He miss the point? Did our Reformation martyrs die in vain? Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, along with consent of the king's council, abolished the use of ashes in 1547.

(Letters of Cranmer, CCLXXXI TO BONAR) The boys of the Oxford Movement, in an attempt to draw near to the POPE, re-established the practice in ANGLICAN churches to the disregard of the gains of the Reformation, and in many other areas as well.

I realize the application of ashes is important to many, and a perceived spiritual benefit may be felt when performed. But would it not be better if we were able to get an even greater spiritual blessing that could remain hidden to man even if more open to God? Just thinking.