

'On earth as it is in heaven'

Churchdown Parish Weekend

Session 4: the hidden place – 'shut the door'

1 'Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

2 'So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 3 But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

5 'And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 6 But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

16 'And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18 so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Matthew 6.1-17

1. 'Beware of practising your piety in public' vs1

'Piety' - the whole business of doing faith

Warning – religion may seriously damage your soul.

'When you give, pray, fast' ... be encouraged – Jesus does assume we are doing all this!

2. '.... In order to be seen by them'

Jesus is very specific in his concern ... an absolute contrast between public and secret.

Public religion as functional atheism.

Jesus calls this hypocrisy – acting. Adopting an image. Creating a false impression.

No reward – or rather it is its own reward

3. A missionary dilemma?

Isn't the greatest challenge for the church is to make itself *more* visible not less?

To grow, make an impact – to be seen?

How do you grow churches secretly?

4. The one who is in secret

Strange stress on God's hiddenness.

God's own freedom

He *graces* us with his presence.

5. Go into your room and shut the door!

In secret with the secret one.

The word 'secret' comes 3 pairings – these utterly reverse all the search for publicity

Shutting the door – then what?

For God alone and for whatever he wills to bless.

'we are so preoccupied about God's relatedness, God being for us, our strategies, our plans, that we do not attend enough to God's hiddenness.'

Walter Brueggemann

a. Being present

We can and do live at some distance from ourselves – so our search is for something that gives a sense of visibility ... of substance ...
Makes us feel real and valuable.

Prodigal Son - 'he came to *himself*'. Lk 15.17

b. Learning detachment

Not that all our activity is wrong
It is how we attach to it all that is the problem.

Detachment: Desert tradition

'Active indifference'. Ignatius

One to ask yourself in the bath: who are you when you when nobody is looking?

Developing a 'negative capability'. 'I am *not*' - see John the Baptist Jn 1.20ff.

A refusal to be defined by the needs and expectations of others.

c. Turning

Always more important than what we turn from is who we turn to.

'I turn to Christ'

In Christ we meet ourselves loved and redeemed and returned to us as gift.

6. The fore-giving God

We are loved in secret - out of sight of any normal measure of transaction, valuing, impressing, contract, deserving ...

Our goodness is no more a way God chooses to know and love us than our badness.

One reason it is hidden from us is because this is way of life and love we have no way of recognising.

If love is unconditional then all our goodness is actually irrelevant. 'Being good' is simply not the basis on which God chooses to know and love us.

This is the secret – received in secret.

This world is utterly, eternally, secretly graced by divine love

Sources

Dietrich Bonhoeffer *Life Together* (SCM 1981) p56ff

Walter Brueggemann *Hopeful Imagination* p71 (SCM 1986)

Edwin Friedman *A failure of nerve – leadership in an age of quick fix.* (Seabury 2007)

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"There is a really
deep well inside me
And in it dwells God
Sometimes I am
there too."
Etty Hillesaum